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Sea Swallow

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Editor:
David Dobson,
Downgate Cottage, Steep Marsh,
Petersfield, Hants GU32 2BE.
Phone: 01730 261344
Email: editor@rnbws.org.uk

Secretary:
Mark Cutts
118 East Weare Road, Portland,
Dorset DT5 1EX.
Phone: 0044 7796 840107
Email: secretary@rnbws.org.uk

Hon. Treasurer:
Tony Tindale,
12 Longfield Avenue,
Fareham, Hants PO14 1DA.
Phone: 01329 319012
Email: treasurer@rnbws.org.uk

Seabird Records Coordinator:
Stephen Chapman,
Steeplefield, Marlpost Road,
Southwater, Horsham RH13 7BZ.
Phone: 07973 533968
Email: data@rnbws.org.uk

Front Cover:
Cory's Shearwater,
Selvagem Grande.
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Designed and typeset by:
Harry Scott (Pica Design)
51 Charlton Crescent, Aboyne,
Aberdeenshire AB34 5GN.
Email: picades@ifb.co.uk

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President: Vice Admiral Sir David Dobson KBE
Vice President: The Master, the Honourable Company of Master Mariners

Executive Committee:
Chairman: Rear Admiral Martin Alabaster CBE.
Email: chairman@rnbws.org.uk

Vice Chairman & Seabird Records Coordinator: Captain Stephen Chapman MN.
Email: data@rnbws.org.uk

Secretary and Field Trips Officer: CPO Mark Cutts.
Email: secretary@rnbws.org.uk

Hon. Treasurer and Membership Secretary: Warrant Officer Tony Tindale.
Email: treasurer@rnbws.org.uk

Librarian: Warrant Officer Steve Copsey.
Email: librarian@rnbws.org.uk

Webmaster: Lieutenant Philip Boak.
Email: webmaster@rnbws.org.uk

Editor, *Sea Swallow*: David Dobson.
Email: editor@rnbws.org.uk

Web site: *www.rnbws.org.uk*

Aims and Activities:
The Society was formed in 1946 to provide a forum for the exchange of information on seabirds, and land birds at sea, by members for whom birdwatching is a spare time recreation and hobby. It also aims to coordinate the efforts of individual members using standardised recording methods so that observations can be of value to the professional ornithologist. In addition to the promotion of observations afloat, the RNBWS organises fieldwork and expeditions, often in cooperation with the Army and RAF Ornithological Societies.

The Royal Naval Birdwatching Society is the only organisation in the world which collects, collates and publishes data on seabirds and landbirds at sea. Membership is open to all those, regardless of nationality, who share a common interest in birds at sea. Instructions for joining can be found on the Society website www.rnbws.org.uk or by application to the Secretary.

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RNBWS Record Forms: These can be found on the website. Completed forms should be sent to the Seabird Records Coordinator (address at left).

Material for publication in *Sea Swallow* should be sent to the editor. Ideally submissions should be in MS Word or rtf format, but other formats are acceptable. Graphics should be jpeg or tiff. Accompanying photographs sent electronically should always be the original camera files, and not cropped in any way. Contributions are welcome at any time, but if for inclusion in the next edition should reach the editor by 30 July.

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Chairman's foreword

by Rear Admiral Martin Alabaster

In this, our 75th anniversary edition, my tone of celebration must be muted as this year we have lost two figures who have been important to the Society for much of its life. First, in April, His Royal Highness Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, died shortly before his 100th birthday. A personal friend of one of our founders, Sir Peter Scott, and a keen conservationist, Prince Philip was our patron almost from the beginning and expressed a real interest in what we were up to. In 2018, when he stepped back from formal duties, we received a nice letter from his secretary saying that he always read *Sea Swallow* and wished to remain as Patron. We have always been proud to have had the support of such an extraordinary man and he will be sadly missed.

Our second loss is that of Bill Bourne and I'm pleased that his huge contribution to RNBWS is properly recognised in the tributes by Michael Casement and Tony Norris.

I usually take a little space in my foreword to provide a brief report on the Society as whole and no-one will be surprised to learn that in this, another year of COVID-19, there is not much to report. Most field trips were cancelled, including support to Zino's Petrel in Madeira, and the major work that survived was in contributing to a RAFOS-led seabird breeding survey in Shetland. Operation "Simmer Dim", for the Joint Nature Conservancy Council, was a follow-up to work conducted in 2019 and is well covered in Stephen Chapman's article.

Meanwhile, the administration of the Society has continued with committee meetings and an AGM successfully conducted via Zoom. With this allowing attendances from Australia and Cyprus as well as the UK, I wonder whether an element of Zoom might usefully be retained for future meetings?

As always, we take time to consider where RNBWS sits in the wider conservation world and how it should change in order to remain relevant in current times. Decisions this year are fully covered in the AGM record, but in essence we plan to find a good home for our sightings records within one of the recognised global databases. This will maximise its usefulness and allow us to simplify our website as well as reducing costs. Meanwhile, the dataset of our records will be available to researchers on request. As well as streamlining the website, we also plan to make more use of social media. This should be more useful to existing members and more likely to attract new ones, such as those from HMS *Echo* whom we welcome this year.

And finally, we still have something special to celebrate in reaching our 75th year and I am very much looking forward to our forthcoming anniversary dinner on 27th November in Portsmouth - details may be found on page 35. This special event will include what I know will be an excellent presentation on Western Pacific Pelagics and will even be subsidised by the Society. I hope to see as many of you there as possible!

Martin Alabaster
Email: chairman@rnbws.org.uk

A nineteenth-century RN birdwatcher

by Captain MK Barritt

Last year we learned of the death of RNBWS member Rear Admiral Roger Morris, former Hydrographer of the Navy, who made significant observations of island populations of sea and land birds during his sea-going career. HM Surveying Ships are in great demand for general duties in the smaller fleet of today, ranging widely with much scope for pelagic observations in regions not often frequented by RN units. They do not, however, often spend extensive periods examining and charting a specific location, as was the case in the career of Admiral Morris and the author of this article, enabling us to render records of local bird populations which could be used by professional ornithologists. An article in the Golden Jubilee Edition (1996) suggested that we were following in a distinguished lineage, including James Cook and James Clark Ross. Our patient editor has been pressing me for some time to contribute some further evidence of past contributions by our forebears. What evidence can be found of contributions from the century before the RNBWS was launched?

Whilst gathering information for a lecture on the subject of British surveys in Japanese waters in the mid-nineteenth century, the following words leapt out from the page of a short biographical entry: 'He is also the author of a work descriptive of the Ornithology of Japan'.[1]

Captain Henry Craven St John Royal Navy

The subject was Captain (later Admiral) Henry Craven St John, a veteran of operations against Chinese pirates who had caught the eye of the Hydrographer by rendering corrections and additions to the charts and sailing directions of his operating area. Arrangements were made for him to spend a year in a surveying ship in the Mediterranean to gain practical experience. In 1869 he was appointed to command HMS *Sylvia* in which he would spend no less than seven years surveying the waters of Japan and Korea. He subsequently commanded HMS *Repulse*, the last wooden battleship constructed for the Royal Navy, and the central battery ironclad HMS *Iron Duke*. His last appointment was as Senior Officer, Coast of Ireland Station, from 1892–95.

Plate 1. Captain Henry Craven St John, Royal Navy. *© Public Domain*

[1] Dawson, *Memoirs of Hydrography*, p175 London, Cornmarket Press 1969.

Plate 2. HMS *Sylvia*. © *Royal Museums Greenwich*

The book to which the biography refers is *Notes and Sketches from the Wild Coasts of Nipon*, and it provides a fascinating perspective on Japan in the early years of interaction with the wider world. Whilst some elements of society were eager to learn and build up national capacity, others were deeply conservative. St John had sympathy for the latter, recording sadness at the 'mania for Western civilisation, ideas, etc.' and the aping of western dress. He lamented a changing world. Comparison of his surveys with present-day maps and satellite imagery reveals an urbanised landscape in many areas. The descriptions in his book present a contrast with the world offered to the tourist in modern guide books. He was able to share the experiences which some of us have enjoyed in remote areas where human impact is minimal. In Korea he recounts:

Today, when using the theodolite, two inquisitive crows (*Corvus japonicus* without doubt) came to see what I was doing. First they carefully examined the instrument box, which was on the ground about five yards off; finding nothing of much interest within, they then walked a little nearer and watched me most attentively. They were perfectly fearless; coolly walking up to my men, who were lying about on the grass, and looked into their faces, much to Jack's amusement.[2]

But what of ornithology? The book has a revealing sub-title, *With Chapters on Cruising after Pirates in Chinese Waters*. The avid reader in Victorian times would not only enjoy the accounts of such skirmishes but would scarcely turn a hair in absorbing the record of St John's bag from shooting excursions. These sit less favourably in our modern eyes. This was indeed still a time when, whilst curious and alert, the naturalist carried a gun and gathered 'specimens'.

[2] *Ibid.*, 270-1.

Reputedly, in childhood Henry St John and his brother were both avid collectors of shells and birds' eggs. This is recorded by the naturalist and taxidermist John Hancock in a collection of correspondence with St John which is held in the archive of the Natural History Society of Northumbria. This includes letters from *Sylvia* in which St John reported his observations and sought advice in identifying species. Hancock was asked to review *Notes and Sketches* and professed himself delighted with the descriptions of the countries which his naval correspondent had visited.

St John professed that 'I am only a lover and observer of nature, and not in any way scientific'. His book nonetheless reflected the hopes expressed by the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty in the Memorandum introducing the *Manual of Scientific Enquiry*. It called for an alert eye and a description of lands and cultures. The library onboard *Sylvia* will have held the third edition of the work, published in 1859. Chapters written by eminent experts encouraged reports from across the scientific spectrum, including zoology. St John deployed a dredge throughout his operations around Japan and Korea and rendered crustacea and mollusca to the British Museum. He recognised that during his surveys around Yesso (Hokkaido) he was penetrating a little known region which 'remains full of riches to the naturalist and explorer'.[3] His directions for the harbours and anchorages which he surveyed were matched with records both of the local inhabitants, their settlements and employment, and the wildlife. At Akishi he noted breeding oystercatchers, 'their eggs surrounded by frozen snow'. *Haematopus ostralegus* is now listed as near-threatened in Japan. There were ten species of duck and a few swans and geese. Numerous skeletons of swans lay around, for the Aino people used their downy skins as part of their winter dress. St John joined in. 'I shot one swan, which proved to be a Whooper Swan *Cygnus musicus*, and excellent eating it was'.

He noted in contrast that the Japanese left duck and geese unmolested and he would disguise himself in local garb so as to 'walk straight up to geese whilst feeding, and often have a right and left at very easy range'. The Mandarin Duck *Aix galericulata* was 'particularly fond of the acorn of the *ilex*'. It was 'the best flavoured' duck as well as 'the most lovely in plumage'. It was 'a pity' to shoot it except to obtain a specimen - or, 'alas! - for one's own eating!' Later he shot a 'couple of spruce grouse, the only birds of the kind I ever saw, not only in Yesso, but anywhere in the East'. These were presumably Northern Hazel Grouse *Tetraster bonasia*. His bag included two indigenous pheasants, Green *Phasianus versicolor* and Copper *Symaticus soemmerringi* whose habitat he distinguishes. The latter is an endemic species now regarded as near-threatened. He deployed his pencil to capture an image of a breeding 'white-tailed white-headed eagle' which he found common in the north.[4] Though his drawing looks remarkably like an osprey, a species which he also stated to be common, he does seem to distinguish the two. Older White-tailed Sea Eagles *Haliaeetus albicilla* are said to have pale heads.

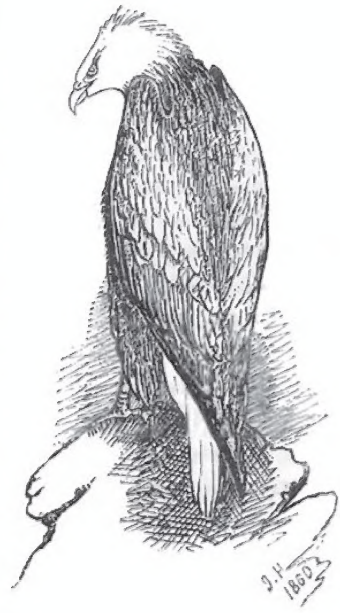

Plate 3. "white-tailed, white-headed eagle".
© Captain Henry Craven St John

[3] St John, *Notes and Sketches*, viii–ix. [4] *Ibid.*, 4–7, 103–4, 106.

Plate 4. Ruddy Kingfisher. © *Captain Henry Craven St John*

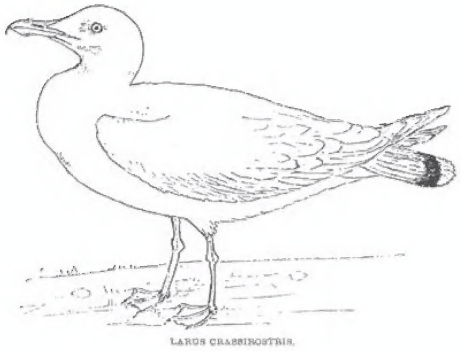

Plate 5. Black-tailed Gull. © *Captain Henry Craven St John*

St John discusses this eagle in an extensive if rather rambling passage on 'the birds of Japan'.[5] He describes encounters with species which he considered similar to those of the British Isles, noting variations in size and plumage. The 'water-ouzel *Cinclus Pallasii*' i.e. the Brown Dipper, did not have the white horse-shoe patch on the breast'. He also notes contrasts in range and behaviour: 'The house-sparrow *Fringilla domestica* does not exist in Japan; but the tree-sparrow *F. montana* takes its place in every way.' These birds are now classed as Passeridae. The Eurasian Tree Sparrow is still reported as a common bird in Japan and the House Sparrow is classed as rare/accidental. St John noted that the useful scavenger, the 'common Japanese crow *Corvus japoniensis*', now classed as a sub-species of the Large-billed Crow *Corvus macrorhyncos*, roosted like rooks, but, like ravens, bred in separate and widely-spaced trees. He records some information on distribution and population, postulating, for example, the breeding area and range of the 'harlequin garrot *Anas histrionica*' i.e. the Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*. His specimens included male and female kingfisher *Halcyon coromanda major* - the Ruddy Kingfisher.

Observations of seabirds are scattered through the text. He noted numerous shearwaters off the east coast of Honshu but could never find their breeding ground. Of the gulls he picks out the Black-tailed *Larus crassirostris* as 'the most interesting'. He found them breeding on Kami Shima in the entrance to Ise Bay.

It is an appendix to the book which merits the note in his biographical record. St John notes that the only reference on Japanese birds which he could obtain was Philipp Franz von Siebold's *Fauna Japonica*, the fourth volume of which covered the class *Aves*. St John had done well to obtain a copy of this book. It covered the southern half of the archipelago. He states that: 'I found it very inconvenient [...] being without a list, however imperfect'. So his appendix contains first a list of those birds identified by Siebold and then a list of 50 other species which St John himself 'collected'. Since he does not list albatross or cormorants yet mentions them in his main text, this may

[5] *Ibid.*, 98–108.

suggest that his list includes only species of which he collected specimens. The following remarks relate purely to the seabirds in the list of what St John collected, and the order of discussion has been adjusted to match that in the RNBWS check-list.

Procellariinae

In his main text St John does not describe the numerous shearwater which were observed off the east coast of Honshu. He lists *Procellaria Puffinus*, presumably the Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus pacificus* which is certainly shown in that area in the distribution diagrams in both Harrison and Tuck and Heinzel. He lists two other unidentified species under *Puffinus pelagica*. His list from Siebold had included *Puffinus leucomelas*, presumably the Streaked Shearwater *Calonectris leucomelas,* now considered near-threatened in Japanese waters, and *Puffinus tenuirostris*, the Short-tailed Shearwater.

Phalaropodidae

St John's *Phalaropus hyperoreus* is presumably the Red-necked *P. lobatus* though the Grey Phalarope is also in the Avibase list.

Stercorariini, Larinae and *Sterninae*

St John lists an unidentified skua as *Lestris*. The list from Siebold included only *Larus melanurus*, the Japanese or Black-tailed Gull which St John had found the most interesting. He added six species. Amongst these were *Larus canus*, and *L. ridibundus*. *L. fuscus, L. cachinnans,* and *L. islandicus* (now *glaucoides*); all are now listed as rare/accidental. His *L. argentatus* is probably the wintering sub-species *L. a. vegae*, which is not shown in the on-line Avibase check-list. Siebold had identified *Sterna fuliginosa* i.e the Sooty Tern *Sterna fuscata*. St John added *Sterna nigra* i.e. the Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*) which is now listed as rare/accidental.

The COVID-19 lock-down prevented further archive and library research, including consultation of modern field guides. Hopefully our advisers can contribute a supplement to this paper, or other members comment in subsequent issues of *Sea Swallow*. Indeed, perhaps a contribution might be forthcoming from HMS *Enterprise*, which has followed the footsteps of St John and HMS *Sylvia* in visiting Japanese waters in the course of general service duties.

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Mike Barritt
Email: mk@mbarritt.com

Plate 6. Wirebird.

Recovery of the St Helena Plover

by Keith Betton

(*All photographs by the author*)

After years of decline, the St Helena Plover *Charadrius sanctaehelenae* is now doing better again and as a result of conservation action one of the world's rarest waders has seen its IUCN status improved from Critically Endangered to Vulnerable.

In March/April 2018 I travelled on the MV *Plancius* from Argentina to the Cape Verde Islands and summarised my findings in *Sea Swallow* 67 (2018) 39–51. My journey included three days of visits to St Helena, and I took time to find out about the species' recovery.

St Helena is a small island of 121 square kilometres in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean about 1,600 kilometres west of Angola. It is one of 14 United Kingdom Overseas Territories and has a human population of just 4,500. It is one of the most remote islands in the world. Locally the St Helena Plover is known as the Wirebird, and that is what I will call it here. It is a special bird and no other wader has been awarded such celebrity status! It features on St Helena's flag, coat of arms, stamps and coins. Settlers first arrived to this British colony in the 1600s and the Wirebird was seen by them - although apparently not recorded by Charles Darwin when he visited on HMS *Beagle* in 1836.

Plates 7–8. Wirebird on a St Helena stamp and five pence coin.

Taxonomically the Wirebird is closely related to Kittlitz's Plover *Charadrius pecurarius* of sub-Saharan Africa, but it is larger and has longer and thinner legs (hence the name Wirebird). It has the smallest range of any *Charadriiform* and is found on only 30 square kilometres of the island due to the availability of suitable habitat. Breeding pairs are predominantly found in two main habitats: dry mid-altitude pasture, and semi-desert areas. In these areas the grass or other broad-leaved herbs are low in height and with some bare ground. They also like open views to help early detection of approaching predators. Wetter upland pastures are avoided, perhaps because of more difficult feeding conditions encountered in taller, denser vegetation on steep slopes.

The birds feed on ground-living insects which they catch using a run and grab technique. The nest is also on the ground and the simple scrape in the soil has a thin lining of dry grass stems and rootlets. These are used to cover the clutch of two eggs when an incubating adult leaves in response to disturbance. Like a number of other plover species, Wirebirds defend their nests by luring predators away. They run a short distance away as soon as the threat is detected, and then pretend to have a broken wing in order to draw the predator away from the nest.

Threats to the Wirebird

Over the last 500 years the settlers and people visiting the island have brought domestic animals such as goats and cats, and along with these there have been unintentional introductions of pests such as rats. One of the pests is the Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*, which was introduced in 1815 in the hope that it would control cattle ticks. It is now the commonest bird on the island and at certain sites it will take Wirebird eggs.

Plate 9. Wirebird distraction display.

Most of the native flora and fauna of St Helena have now disappeared and much of the land has been adapted for agriculture. As a direct result of the

habitat changes and increased predation the Wirebird has been on a steady decline for much of the last 40 years. There are no detailed counts going back over the centuries, but we do know that the population declined at an alarming rate after the 1970s. The St Helena National Trust has taken a keen interest in the species and from surveys we know that in the late 1980s there were 450 birds, declining to 350 in the late 1990s. In 2006 only 208 adult birds were found and as a result in the following year the species was categorised as Critically Endangered.

These declines were caused by a mixture of factors. The effects of feral cats and rats on the Wirebird have varied between different sites, but in some areas more than 80% of nests have been destroyed. So In 2011 a programme of removing these introduced animals commenced. This has made a huge difference to the birds' success rate.

But potential habitat loss has also been a recent issue. In a bid to boost tourism receipts the UK Government decided to finance the building of an airport on St Helena and the first commercial flight landed in October 2017. The airport footprint includes areas that have regularly been used by Wirebirds over the years, but the RSPB, in partnership with the St Helena Government and St Helena National Trust established mitigation areas for the birds to nest and feed and although some key habitat was lost the effect seems not to have been negative. A wind farm has also been built across one of the main breeding areas, and despite a series of huge turbines right by many nesting pairs there appears to have been no obvious negative effect.

A current worry is the proposed creation of the 'Wirebird Hills' hotel and golf course at Broad Bottom. Although this site contains one of the five most important breeding areas for Wirebirds the proposal has been given outline planning permission. Once again the RSPB and St Helena National Trust have offered to work with the developer and their consultants to ensure that enough undisturbed and suitably managed habitat is retained. Although this proposal has received plenty of publicity since plans were announced in 2012, as of October 2020 there has been no further development - probably because so few tourists visit the island.

Plate 10. Wirebird nesting habitat with wind turbines.

Vegetation surveys have also supported the results of previous studies which suggested that the continual decline in birds may also have been associated with degradation of the Wirebird's favoured grassland habitat due to reduction of livestock numbers. So another part of the conservation initiative has been to improve pastureland to provide benefits both for the birds and the island's farmers, and over 150 hectares of habitat have benefited from this.

Plate 11. Wirebird speed limit warning.

Communication with the island's residents has also been important, but despite this being the island's 'national' bird, too many of them get hit by vehicles when they occasionally stand in the road. Indeed last year three were killed in just one week. There are now warning signs to alert people to take care - but sadly some people are always in too much of a hurry.

Recent results give fresh hope

Having told you about the problems - here is the good news. Wirebird numbers have generally been improving since the recovery work started. When I visited in 2018 the annual survey found 627 adult birds. Since then there has been a slight drop back to 545 in 2019 and 537 in 2020. The reasons for this are not fully understood but are thought to be linked to increased land use in areas where the birds want to breed. In addition increased road traffic near to the airport has resulted in more than 20 birds being killed in recent years.

The survey, which covers 31 locations around the island, has been carried out annually since 1998. Numbers of adults, juveniles, chicks and nests have been recorded and it is clear that results have improved greatly since the conservation intervention started. Wirebird numbers in locations that have been under active

Plate 12. Wirebird incubating eggs.

Plate 13. Wirebird using feet to cover eggs with vegetation.

Plate 14. Wirebird nest with covered eggs.

predator control and pasture management have shown the greatest increases despite a recent drought which has affected breeding success in some years, so for now the Wirebird is enjoying a revival.

This is one of the UK's rarest breeding birds, and yet only a handful of UK citizens have seen it, and only a few more have ever heard about it. So congratulations to the St Helena National Trust and the RSPB for putting in the work to save this bird - and thank you to the UK Government for paying for it. If the UK doesn't look after its endemic birds nobody else will.

How to see a Wirebird

There are two ways to reach St Helena. Occasionally cruise ships pass through the area, but the easiest way to travel is to fly from Johannesburg. Flights are weekly, arriving on Saturdays, but additional flights are being planned. The airport is called Jamestown. More details https://www.flyairlink.com

Although you can easily find Wirebirds on some of the grassy areas on the island near to the Millennium Forest and Airport, I recommend joining a tour organised by the St Helena National Trust. That way you are helping to fund the bird's conservation. More details: http://www.sthelenaisland.info/st-helena-national-trust/

Keith Betton
Email: keithbetton@hotmail.com

Figure 1. The North Pacific. © *Google Earth*

Landbirds at sea - Eastern Asia

by Simon Cook
(*All photographs by the author*)

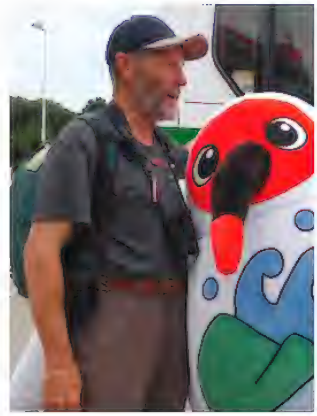

Plate 15. The author with friend.

Eastern Asia, particularly the Russian Far East is for me probably unmatched in terms of the wildlife and scenery. Memories that spring to mind include spotting my first Polar Bear, seeing all three North Pacific albatrosses, being surrounded by thousands of auklets, encountering both Baird's and Hubb's Beaked Whales and discovering, completely by chance, breeding Spoon-billed Sandpipers. Being on the 'Pacific Ring of Fire' the landscape in many places is dominated by hugely impressive, occasionally snow-clad, frequently simmering and sometimes erupting volcanoes.

Over the years, in *Sea Swallow*, there have been scattered reports of another aspect of the rich avifauna of eastern Asia - land birds at sea. However, there has been no definitive account, and in this article I draw together my own observations of this exciting class of birds. Who, for example, could not fail to be impressed by the sight of a spring male Siberian Rubythroat hopping about on deck? Rather than amalgamate all of the species records into one list I have elected to keep them in context by putting them into visit-by-visit order.

1993 - Russia

I made this exciting journey as a client of bird tour firm *Birdquest* on a trailblazing voyage in the Russian Far East, shortly after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Our rusty old ship, MV *Fedor Matisen*, 69 m and 1,134 tons, had been discovered and used by the company for a few days the previous year and was then chartered for a full cruise. Embarkation in Korsakov, on Sakhalin Island followed several days of high octane birding in the area. Life birds included Narcissus Flycatcher, Sakhalin Leaf Warbler and Japanese Accentor.

The ship sailed up the Kuril Island chain before heading out to the Commander Islands, where landings from the ship's temperamental lifeboat were made. On the way numerous land birds were seen, the majority of which would have been late spring migrants. We then sailed to Kamchatka before finishing close to the huge naval base at Petropavlosk-Kamchatskiy. The city was dominated by two massive conical snow-capped volcanoes - Avachinskaya Sopka at 9,000' (2,741 m) and Koryakskaya Sopka at 11,400' (3,456 m). On the previous day four other massive things were seen - my first and hugely impressive Steller's Sea Eagles.

Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*. 11/6 at sea to Bering Island: one seen from the ship.
Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*. 11/6 at sea to Bering Island: one seen from the ship.
Gyr Falcon *Falco rusticolus*. 10/6 from Paramushir, Kurils to Bering Island, Commander Islands. One flew straight towards the ship, veered and half-heartedly chased a Slaty-backed Gull before singling out a Fork-tailed Storm-petrel, which it made a real effort to catch. Both birds twisted and turned just above the sea before the falcon gave up; we were several miles from the nearest island.
Middendorff's (Grasshopper) Warbler *Locustella ochotensis*. 11/6 at sea to Bering Island: three; the first was seen on the ship from 08:30–11:00 hrs, when it was picked up, moribund. It later died and, when examined, it was found that it's fat reserves and flight muscles had been used up. The second was flying around the bow, re-orientated and flew off towards far-away Kamchatka and the third was on board later in the day, hopping about above the bridge. 14/6 off Mednyy Island, Commander Islands: two; one was caught, boxed and roosted overnight and released off Bering Island the following morning.

Plate 16 a. Eastern Cattle Egret. **b.** Barn Swallow. **c.** Little Curlew.

Pallas's Warbler *Phylloscopus proregulus*. 11/6 at sea to Bering Island: one of these sprites on board, briefly.
Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis* 11/6 at sea to Bering Island: two, and I missed a third on board. The first was seen very well and at one point it flew down into the open hold before re-emerging. The second one was a singing male at 22:40 hrs, which then flew off to the northeast.
***Phylloscopus* warbler sp**. 11/6 at sea to Bering Island: one flew past the bows, probably an Arctic Warbler.
Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope*. 11/6 at sea to Bering Island: two; one male at 14:45 hrs on various parts of the ship before flying off the bow and out to sea, one female on the bow at 15:20 hrs. 12/6, 65 nm SW of Bering Island: a female came in off the sea onto the ship, flew off and returned, flew off again and returned again, then flew off high to the SSW, towards Kamchatka.
Oriental Greenfinch *Carduelis sinica*. 8/6 southern Sea of Okhotsk: one flew over the ship.
Oriental Skylark *Alauda gulgula*. 9/6 off southern Kuril Islands: one flew past the ship. 10/6 from Paramushir, Kurils, to Bering Island: one seen from the ship.
Grey Bunting *Emberiza variabilis*. 10/6 off northern Kurils: seven flew past the ship, 10/6 from Paramushir, Kurils, to Bering Island: one female went to roost on the upperdeck.
Taiga Flycatcher *Ficedula albicilla*. 11/6 at sea to Bering Island: single male seen flying off the ship.
White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*. 10/6 off northern Kurils: two flew past the ship.
Buff-bellied Pipit *Anthus rubescens*. 10/6 off northern Kurils: four flew past the ship.
Pechora Pipit *Anthus gustavi*. 12/6 SW of Bering Island: five flying over the ship towards Bering Island.

1998 - Russia

Starting in Provideniya on the MV *Shuleykin*, my July/August voyages encompassed this part of the mainland, the Chukchi Sea, the Commander Islands, Kamchatka, the Kuril Islands and Sakhalin Island. Probably not through a lack of looking but more likely due to the season, there were only two sightings of land birds at sea. However, there was a tremendous amount of other wildlife, such as seabirds and marine mammals. The 'sightings highlight' was the 24 hour period from 22:00 hrs on 30 July when I saw 3–400 Walrus, one Bowhead Whale, spotted my first Polar Bear and found a Spoon-billed Sandpiper with a chick.

Rock Sandpiper *Calidris ptilocnemis*. 12/8 Bering Sea, approaching Kamchatka: six on the stern from early to mid-morning.
Eastern Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla tschutschensis*. 10/8 at sea en route to the Commander Islands: one seen, just over 60 nm from Bering Island.

2007 - Japanese waters

Kagoshima, on Kyushu, Japan was the final destination of the first Western Pacific Odyssey run by Heritage Expeditions in 2007. Starting in New Zealand, visits were made to Norfolk Island, New Caledonia, the Solomon Islands and the Caroline Islands. Land birds were encountered during the seven days at sea from the Northern Mariana Islands to Kagoshima.

Striated Heron *Butorides striata*. 25/4 approaching Kagoshima (wind and rain from the north): two on the bow at 05:15 hrs at 31.3N, 134.6E.

Eastern Cattle Egret *Bubulcus coromandus*. 25/4: one aboard at 05:15 hrs, two more flew around the ship and then away shortly afterwards, one going NW at 15:42 hrs and two more (with an Intermediate Egret) flew by at 15:06 hrs.
Great White Egret *Casmerodius albus*. 25/4: one flew past the ship before breakfast.
Intermediate Egret *Mesophoyx intermedia*. 25/4: 0ne flew by at 15:06 hrs with Cattle Egrets.
Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*. 25/4: two flew past the ship before breakfast.
Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*. 24/4: five flew past the ship, going west; one flew round the ship from 18:06–18:30 hrs at 31N, 136.4E and landed on board. It looked exhausted and was still aboard the next day. 25/4: a singleton in full breeding plumage flew past the ship at 17:40 hrs, about 90 nm offshore.
Little Curlew *Numenius minutus*. 20/4, at sea north of the Mariana Islands: prolonged, close-range views of singleton flying around the ship from 11:25–11:35 hrs, 12:08–12:34 hrs and 13:58–13:59 hrs, 45 nm ENE of the nearest island.
Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*. 25/4 to Kagoshima: one flew past the ship at 15:55 hrs at 31.5N, 133.2E.
Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*. 22/4 west of the Bonin Islands: our by now resident bird was again hand-fed many flies. In the early evening it flew into the bridge, settled on the radar and autopilot and then flew out through an open window. It was present all next day and given more flies. 24/4: our resident was joined by six others during the late afternoon - some roosted onboard and there were still six the following day. 'Our' bird was still on board and being fed meat and flies on 26/4 and was last seen at 11:00 hrs flying down the wake, 55 nm E of Kyushu, but it was flying ENE.
Chestnut-cheeked Starling *Sturnus philippensis*. 25/4: three were seen flying away from the ship at *c*. 05:30 hrs but one came back and perched on an aerial for 20–30 minutes.
Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala*. 24/4 to Kagoshima: one flew around the ship from 14:16–14:21 hrs, landing briefly on the upper deck.
Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope*. 24/4 to Kagoshima: one seen soon after the bunting, flying off high to the SE.
Blue-and-white Flycatcher *Cyanoptila cyanomelana*. 26/4 to Kagoshima: two males among a group of 14 passerines at 17:58 hrs.

2009 - Russia

There were two late spring cruises for me this year, starting and finishing in Petropavlosk-Kamchatskiy, Kamchatka. Places visited included the Commander Islands, coastal Kamchatka, the Kuril Islands and Sakhalin Island. There were two notable highlights - one wildlife and the other geological. The wildlife one was on the afternoon of 27/6 when the ship was sailing from Bering Island to Medny Island. In addition to a plethora of seabirds I saw a breaching Humpback Whale, two Sperm Whales, 17 Killer Whales and 19 Baird's Beaked Whales. The geological one was being ashore when the Sarycheva Volcano (4,744'/1,446 m) in the Kurils erupted. Cloud down to almost sea level prevented us from seeing it but we heard it, smelt it and felt it when we were hit by shock waves. What we did see was a super-heated lahar rushing down out of the cloud and surging across the sea not far away. With ash raining down (the plume went up 14 km) and a huge electrical storm brewing, we did a rapid, casualty-free emergency evacuation back to the ship.

Goosander *Mergus merganser*. 24/6 Kuril Strait: four males and two females seen going south.
Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*. 7/6 at sea over the Kuril Trench: single male flew around the ship from 07:17–07:36 hrs at *c*. 54.1N, 163E.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*. 10/6 at sea towards Kamchatka: two males flew past the ship before breakfast at 53.9N, 160.6E.
Dunlin *Calidris alpine*. 7/6 a few miles off Bering Island: one flew past the ship at 18:00 hrs.
Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*. 19/6 off Kunashir Island, Kurils: one at 11:45 hrs, flying around the ship - I just missed seeing it land briefly on the bow.
Middendorff's? Warbler *Locustella ochotensis*. 15/6 approaching Urup Island, Kurils: one bird of possibly this species was seen flying around the bow.
Taiga Flycatcher *Ficedula albicilla*. 11/6 approaching the Utashud Islands, Kurils: one immature male with a small spot of orange on its throat seen from 07:55–10:12 hrs, 5½ nm offshore, settling on the bow, when its wet plumage could be seen. It was quite active and was seen to catch a fly. It flew off towards land as we anchored.
White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*. 10/6 just off the mouth of the Zhupanova River, Kamchatka: one landed briefly on the stern A-frame.

2015 - Nome, Alaska to Keelung, Taiwan via Russia and Japan

This journey of 6,141 nm encompassed a large swathe of the North Pacific Ocean during the autumn migration season. Consequently, an excellent variety of land birds was seen from the ship whilst underway. The best came on the morning of 1 September, when the ship was off the coast of Hokkaido, Japan. In addition to various warblers, wagtails and a pipit flying past the ship, four absolute gems landed onboard - Asian Stubtail, Grey's (Grasshopper) Warbler, Siberian Rubythroat and Siberian Blue Robin!

Falcated Duck *Anas falcata*. 3/9 Sea of Japan: five females/immatures at 09:44 hrs 17 nm north of Sado Island.
Eastern Spot-billed Duck *Anas zonorhyncha*. 3/9 Sea of Japan: one going ESE at 06:06 hrs, 42 nm off Honshu.
Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*. 5/9 Sea of Japan: three females/immatures going south, 5 nm off Sakaiminato Port.
King Eider *Somateria spectabilis*. 15/8 Bering Sea: two.
Chinese Pond Heron *Ardeola bacchus*. 19/9 at sea, Ryukyu Islands: one in non-breeding plumage flew NE past the ship at 07:27 hrs, 18 nm west of Okinoerabu Shima.

Plate 17 a. Middendorff's Warbler. **b.** Blue Rock Thrush. **c.** Siberian Blue Robin.

Eastern Cattle Egret *Bubulcus coromandus*. 5/9 two in sight from 08:04–08:18 hrs, 33 nm from Miyakojima.
Purple Heron? 19/9 at sea, Ryukyu Islands: five distant birds from 10:48–10:58 hrs on the approach to Hirara Ko Port.
Great White Egret *Ardea alba*. 21/9 approaching Keelung, Taiwan: two flew over the ship towards land (two nm away) at 05:55 hrs.
egret sp. Two over a mile away and going west at 07:18 hrs, 3.8 nm offshore.
Gyr Falcon *Falco rusticolus*. 26/8 off southern Kamchatka: a huge, very dark brown and heavily streaked immature from 05:35–05:43 hrs, four nm offshore. It flew around the ship a few times and then chased two small groups of Crested Auklets, both of which crash-dived into the sea. It also went after four phalaropes, up high, also unsuccessfully. Almost certainly the same bird around the ship again from 09:08–09:11 hrs, 6.8 nm offshore.
Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* 26/8 off southern Kamchatka: one seen going south at 10:01 hrs.
Grey-tailed Tattler *Tringa brevipes*. 26/8 off southern Kamchatka: two going south - one at 10:34 hrs and one at 11:33 hrs at 51N, 157.1E. 27/8 Sea of Okhotsk: two at 15:11 hrs at 49.5N, 149.9E flew around the ship a few times and then continued southwards. 28/8 Sea of Okhotsk: one flew past the ship with a Great Knot. 5/9 Sea of Japan: one heard at 05:17 hrs, 12 nm off Sakaiminato Port. 6/9 approaching South Korea: six going east at 07:01 hrs, 26 nm E of Changgigot Port.
Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* 19/8 Kamchatkan coastal waters: one flew past a fluking, flipper-slapping, tail-lobbing Humpback Whale at 14:20 hrs at 61.1N, 172.7E and two at 15:40 hrs at 61N, 172.4E. 28/8 south of Sakhalin Island: one at 16:39 hrs at 47.8N, 144.4E.
Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris*. 28/8 Sea of Okhotsk: one flew past the ship with a Grey-tailed Tattler.
Pacific Swift *Apus pacificus*. 30/8 Sea of Japan: six; one at 06:31 hrs, two 06:46–06:50 hrs (calling to each other), and three at 07:00 hrs at *c*. 44.3N, 141.2E.
Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* 1/9 just off the SW tip of Hokkaido: ten going south at 07:20 hrs at 41.4N, 139.9E.
Asian Stubtail *Urosphena squamiceps*. 1/9 15 nm off Hokkaido: I was on the starboard bridge wing at 05:25 hrs when I saw what I thought was a big moth fluttering against a window. The bird was distinctive for its small size, pale underparts, dark upperparts and a very short tail.

Plate 18 a. Pacific Golden Plover.
b. Rock Sandpipers. **c.** Siberian Rubythroat.

Gray's (Grasshopper) Warbler *Locustella fasciolata*. 1/9 15 nm off Hokkaido: one landed on a rope below the starboard lifeboat - seen from above and below.
***Locustella*? warbler** 1/9 off southwest Hokkaido: one flushed from deck at 05:05 hrs.
***Phylloscopus* warbler sp.** one at 06:41 hrs, 22 nm north of Hokkaido, another seen by passengers during breakfast and landing by the pool.
warbler sp. 1/9 15 nm off Hokkaido: three flew past the ship at 05:15 hrs.
Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope*. 1/9 15 nm off Hokkaido: one very flighty imm. on the upperdeck at 05:43 hrs.
Siberian Blue Robin *Luscinia cyane*. 1/9 5 nm off the SW tip of Hokkaido: one imm. male at 07:08 hrs - I watched it land on a rope tied to a Zodiac about six feet away and then fly to a nearby screen.
Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*. 1/9 approaching Okayama: one imm. landed on the ship - 05:47–06:07 hrs; very scaly and very active, mostly on deck seven but also down on the bow.
Narcissus Flycatcher *Ficedula narcissina*. 19/9 at sea, Ryukyu Islands: one female in flight (identified from photographs) at 09:56 hrs, 13 nm off Miyakojima.
Eastern Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla tschutschensis*. 19/9 at sea, Ryukyu Islands: six between 08:43 hrs and 11:07–11:24 hrs to 2 nm offshore. 21/9 to Taiwan: five between 05:32 hrs and 06:43 hrs (24N, 122E) - three landed on deck briefly.
Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*. 26/8 23 nm south of Cape Turpeniya, Sakhalin Island: one flying around the ship at 14:10 hrs. 1/9 15 nm off southwest Hokkaido: one going east across the bow. 2/9 Aomori Bay, Honshu: one at 05:30 hrs, 5 nm from the head of the bay. 18/9 at sea, Ryukyu Islands: one heard at 09:43 hrs, 3 nm E of Iheya Shima. 19/9 at sea, Ryukyu Islands: four between 08:32 hrs and 10:58–11:28 hrs to 4 nm offshore. 21/9 to Taiwan: three between 06:17 hrs and 07:30 hrs, 2 nm offshore.
White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* 30/8 en route to Otaru, Sea of Japan: one at 05:58 hrs, 5 nm south of Teuri To (island), Hokkaido, flew around the ship and went off southeast, one at 07:28 hrs. 1/9 15 nm off southwest Hokkaido: four.
pipit sp. 1/9 off southwest Hokkaido: one flew past the ship at 06:51 hrs - there was a single *schreep* call so probably a Richard's Pipit.

The possibility of seeing land birds at sea is a big attraction for me when I am on ships and my records show how exciting and largely unpredictable these birds are. This series of voyages encompassed a diverse part of eastern Asia, provided outstanding wildlife encounters and created lifelong memories.

References

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Simon Cook
Email: cookbirder@hotmail.com

Appendix 1. Additional scientific names.

Sperm Whale *Physeter macrocephalus*
Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*
Bowhead Whale *Balaena mysticetus*
Killer Whale *Orcinus orca*
Baird's Beaked Whale *Berardius bairdii*
Hubb's Beaked Whale *Mesoplodon carlhubbsi*
Walrus *Odobenus rosmarus*
Polar Bear *Ursus maritimus*
Steller's Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus pelagicus*
Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmeus*
Japanese Murrelet *Synthilboramphus wumizusume*
Crested Auklet *Aethia cristatella*
Sakhalin Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus borealoides*
Japanese Accentor *Prunella rubida*

The Seychelles - twenty years of seabird research and monitoring

by Adrian Skerrett
(*All photographs by the author*)

Abstract

Twenty years ago, a new NGO was formed in Seychelles, Islands Conservation Society (ICS) and today it has five conservation centres spread throughout the islands, coordinated from a Head Office on Mahé. A key area for monitoring and research has been seabird populations, and some previously unknown seabird populations have been discovered. However, data gathered to date indicates concerns regarding population trends. Many populations appear to be in decline yet some are increasing. Climate change, overfishing, poaching, habitat changes and different feeding strategies in the face of oceanic changes may all be factors impacting seabirds. More data and research are needed to understand what is happening in our oceans and how it is influencing marine life, including breeding seabirds. ICS runs centres at three of the 20 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) of Seychelles: Aride, Silhouette and Farquhar. It has conducted surveys throughout the outer islands of Seychelles including at uninhabited islands. ICS has also identified three new sites that satisfy threshold criteria for inclusion as future IBAs, based on seabird populations: St François Atoll, Bancs Providence and St Joseph Atoll. However, the status of seabird populations at two existing IBA sites is of concern and they may possibly no longer meet IBA thresholds: African Banks and Étoile.

Figure 1. The Seychelles Archipelago. © *Mathew Morgan, Island Conservation Society*

The formation of Island Conservation Society

Seychelles ranks 54th out of 54 countries of Africa in terms of landmass with less than half the land area of São Tomé and Príncipe ranked just one place higher in 53rd place (List of African countries by area, 2021). However, it has the second largest exclusive economic zone of Africa, just slightly smaller than that of South Africa (Exclusive Economic Zone, 2021). To give a sense of scale, the nation's total landmass is smaller than the Isle of Man, but the islands are spread over an EEZ greater than the landmass of United Kingdom, France and Germany combined. About 90% of the population live on Mahé and most of the rest inhabit the neighbouring islands situated on the shallow Seychelles Bank. This group of 40 granitic islands and two sand cays is known as the inner islands, where breeding seabirds are mainly on a few rat-free islands. On much of the remainder, the outer islands of Seychelles, seabirds are the dominant lifeform, using the scattered coral islands and atolls as a navy might use an aircraft carrier: small but vital bases from which to patrol a vast maritime area.

Until the turn of the millennium, conservation efforts in Seychelles were focused almost entirely on the inner islands, with the exception of the World Heritage Site of Aldabra in the extreme southwestern corner of the archipelago. These outer islands were little known to most Seychellois and rarely visited except for calls by a few charter vessels and by poachers who took turtles, birds and eggs without any control (Edmond 2021). The Wild Animals and Birds Protection Act (14 April 1961) declares eight islands as nature reserves, but without any resident guardians except at one, and there have been no prosecutions.

By the mid-1990s, I had personally sailed to or joined charter boats to visit every corner of Seychelles including all these beautiful and distant islands, but standing on remote shorelines of uninhabited islands brought mixed emotions. There was a sense of privilege but also of dread, because it was obvious that damage was being done and that these small islands were very fragile. I joined with a small group of like-minded people to try to stimulate action. However, government officials had little interest. The islands were too remote, I was told; the logistics of operating there were too difficult and expensive; we have our hands full in the granitic islands. No NGO showed much interest either, for similar reasons.

It was clear that a new NGO was needed to focus on the outer islands of Seychelles. Nearly all the outer islands of Seychelles are government-owned, managed by Islands Development Company (IDC), a government parastatal. Since its creation in 1980, IDC had focused on agricultural development, especially copra production, but it was struggling to make activities pay due to economies of scale compared to Asian countries and high labour costs. If conservation in the outer islands was to take off, IDC had to be on board. I visited CEO Glenny Savy to discuss a plan for a new NGO.

"Adrian, this is music to my ears," said Glenny. "Copra has gone and that is not such a bad thing because we have raised wages beyond what is competitive in the industry. The future belongs to economic activities with higher value for Seychellois and that means ecotourism and a focus on the protection of the environment".

Others in Seychelles shared this ambition. They included Dr Rolph Payet, who had obtained his PhD from research in sustainable tourism, and the ornithologist Gérard Rocamora. Together we founded Island Conservation Society (ICS). Other trustees joined, including Dr Jeanne A Mortimer who had spent many years living in the outer islands researching turtle populations, and Pat Matyot, who had a high level of

expertise in the study of local invertebrates and flora. We had no staff, no office and no money, but you have to start somewhere. Today, ICS has a network of five island conservation centres throughout Seychelles with plans for more to be opened. It has an agreement with IDC endorsed by Ministry of Environment to act as conservation advisers in the outer islands and an associated UK Registered Charity, Island Conservation Society UK, which owns the freehold to Aride Island, the largest nature reserve in the granitic islands. Foundations have been formed for twelve islands or island groups to partner with IDC, Ministry of Environment and investors in the islands to raise funds for conservation work conducted by ICS. Endowment funds have been established to support conservation on three islands.

Plate 19. Aride Island.

Aride Island Nature Reserve

An early opportunity for ICS came in 2003. Aride Island Nature Reserve is not in the outer islands but retains much the same character, being relatively isolated with no roads, no running water or mains electricity. Aride was purchased in 1973 by the Royal Society for Nature Conservation (RSNC, now the Wildlife Trusts) with funds donated by Christopher Cadbury who was President of RSNC from 1962 to 1988.

Ownership of foreign islands came to be regarded by RSNC as something of an historical anomaly for a wildlife organisation focused on UK conservation. The trustees of RCNC believed the time had come to focus solely upon UK and transfer overseas assets to local management. RSNC had already transferred ownership of Cousin Island in Seychelles to BirdLife International and islands owned in the Falklands to the Falklands Islands Foundation. I met with RSNC on behalf of ICS. A trial management period was agreed with a series of conservation goals to be achieved. ICS met these targets and was able to convince the Trustees of RSNC and the UK Charity Commissioners of their ability to take on the important task of managing Aride Island. A leasehold arrangement was drawn up, the ownership was transferred to Island Conservation Society UK, and the island was leased to ICS Seychelles.

Aride Island Nature Reserve hosts some of the most important seabird colonies of the Indian Ocean. It was recognised as an Important Bird Area (IBA) in 2001, mainly because of its huge seabird populations (Table 1). These include the world's largest colonies of two species: Lesser Noddy and Tropical Shearwater. The Roseate Tern colony of Aride is the largest in Seychelles, and birds are possibly a regional race *arideensis* (sometimes included in race *gracilis*), named after the island.

Table 1. Key species of the Aride Island Important Bird Area in 2001.

Globally threatened species - Seychelles Warbler *Acrocephalus sechellensis*
Restricted range species - Granitic Seychelles Endemic Bird Area

Congregatory species	Breeding populations (range)
Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii*	1,100–1,300 pairs
Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscatus*	261,000–366,000 pairs
Fairy (White) Tern *Gygis alba*	3,900–5,900 pairs
Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*	4,400–11,600 pairs
Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris*	136,000–197,000 pairs
Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna pacifica*	8,700–28,400 pairs
Tropical Shearwater *Puffinus bailloni*	43,000–72,000 pairs
White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus*	276–972 pairs

Source: Adapted from Rocamora and Skerrett, 2001.

Seabird research at Aride has included the first study of the use of geolocators to track the movements of pelagic tropical seabirds: Wedge-tailed Shearwater and Tropical Shearwater. This reveals that during late chick-rearing and pre-breeding periods, shearwaters forage relatively close to the colony but outside the breeding season are found on a west-east gradient along the equator, between 5N and 10S. At sea distribution largely matches that of yellowfin and skipjack tunas, emphasising the importance of the association with subsurface predators rather than with physical oceanographic features (Catry *et al.* 2009).

Research also revealed that Tropical Shearwaters dive up to 16 metres whereas Wedge-tailed Shearwaters are more surface feeders, suggesting vertical foraging segregation. Outside the breeding season, the Tropical Shearwater exploits a much smaller marine area than the Wedge-tailed Shearwater, but some travel to the south of Madagascar, the Mozambique Channel, the East African coast, and the Arabian Sea. These results support the hypothesis of a significant interspecific competition between the two species that may apply both at sea for food resources, and on land for habitat selection of nesting burrows (Calabrese 2015).

Cosmoledo Atoll

The first major project of ICS in the outer islands was launched in 2005, led by founding trustee Gérard Rocamora and funded by Fonds Français pour l'Environnement Mondial (French Global Environment Facility or FFEM). IDC also gave financial and logistical support. The FFEM project included a focus on the restoration of the islands of Cosmoledo, a raised coralline atoll of the Aldabra group and another IBA (Table 2).

Cosmoledo lies over 1,000 km from the inner islands of Seychelles, much closer to Africa (700 km to the west) and to Madagascar (400 km to the southeast) than it is to the main island of Mahé. It comprises thirteen islands and a few tiny islets surrounding a roughly circular lagoon. It is dominated by salt-resistant *Pemphis acidula*, but there are some extensive open grassy areas suitable for three species of ground-nesting seabirds not present on Aldabra (Masked Booby, Brown Booby and Sooty Tern). Populations are globally significant for Masked Booby subspecies *melanops*, Red-footed Booby subspecies *rubripes*, and Sooty Tern subspecies *nubilosa* (Rocamora *et al.* 2003).

The islands of Menai and Grand Ile used to have resident human populations engaged in agriculture, fishing and the exploitation of seabirds, seabird eggs and turtles. However, Cosmoledo was abandoned in the 1980s and it is believed it was

subsequently visited most frequently by boats from both within Seychelles and from Comoros engaged in the illegal poaching of seabirds, eggs and turtles.

Table 2. Key species of the Cosmoledo Important Bird Area in 2001.

Congregatory species	Breeding populations (range)
Greater Crested Tern *Thalasseus bergii*	100–500 pairs
Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana*	50–100 pairs
Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscatus*	1,100,000 pairs
Red-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon rubricauda*	50–200 pairs
Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra*	5,000–6,000 pairs
Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*	Over 15,000 pairs
Congregatory species	**Non-breeding populations (max.)**
Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola*	2,000
Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*	400

Source: Adapted from Rocamora and Skerrett, 2001.

ICS eradicated Black Rats from the islands of Grande Ile (142 ha), Grand Polyte (21 ha), Petit Polyte (1 ha) and set up abatement measures (30 bait stations) to prevent reinvasion at six potential landing points and campsites. There was a significant reduction in the number of cats following rat eradication and invasive Sisal was removed from about 40% of Grand Polyte. Confirmation of success came in 2013 when for the first time since 1964, Masked Booby were recorded breeding at Grand Ile (Skerrett 2013).

ICS has also conducted the first assessment of the Greater Crested Tern breeding population at Cosmoledo with 234 pairs in 2018, and updated the population estimate for the whole of Seychelles to 548–790 pairs (Nogués *et al.* 2018).

Plate 20. Cosmoledo Atoll rat eradication.

Plate 21. St François Atoll.

Alphonse and St François Atolls

The first ICS conservation centre in the outer islands was opened at Alphonse in 2007, to carry out research and monitoring activities here and at neighbouring St François Atoll. A new organisation, the Alphonse Foundation was formed embracing ICS, IDC, Ministry of Environment and hotel investors on the island. Funding was provided mainly from a conservation levy on visitors. An agreement was signed whereby Alphonse Foundation approves projects and budgets for conservation efforts which are then implemented by ICS.

St François Atoll is not classified as an IBA but it really should be. It was proposed and accepted as a candidate IBA in the first inventory of IBAs presented to a national workshop in 1998 (Rocamora & Skerrett 1999). However, it was removed from the final IBA list following concerns expressed by BirdLife Seychelles (now Nature Seychelles) that there were insufficient data to support inclusion. This may have been true at the time, but today, ICS has removed all doubt about the importance of St François for seabirds and shorebirds.

Black-naped Tern was proved to be breeding at St François in 2008 (Adam *et al.* 2008). Regular counts by ICS confirm that St François consistently exceeds IBA thresholds for breeding populations of Black-naped Tern and non-breeding populations for Crab Plover, Ruddy Turnstone and Saunders's Tern *Sternula saundersi* (Skerrett 1996, Skerrett 2001, Betts 2007). Numbers of Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* (600 birds) and Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola* (250 birds) are below the IBA thresholds, but are still the highest recorded in Seychelles, further illustrating the importance of St François (Betts 2007). Therefore, St François Atoll meets IBA criteria for four species of congregatory waterbirds. In addition, the presence on neighbouring Alphonse Atoll of full-time conservation staff and Blue Safari, a South African eco-friendly tourism operator, makes St François relatively straightforward to protect and thus even more relevant as an IBA.

Desroches

In 2008, ICS opened its second conservation centre in the outer islands at Desroches, supported by funding from Desroches Foundation, based on the same model as Alphonse Foundation. At this time, Desroches had no remaining breeding seabirds. Almost two centuries of human settlement had resulted in loss of habitat, direct exploitation and the introduction of rats and cats. However, a small colony of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters was discovered in 2001 near the lighthouse, at the northeastern end of the island. This lighthouse colony had disappeared by the time ICS opened up a conservation centre on Desroches, but in November 2008, a small colony, estimated at 20 active burrows, was discovered at the opposite end of Desroches Island, near to the only hotel on the island. Rat controls were implemented, and the colony grew. It was also found to be greater in extent than first realised and by late 2015, 540 active burrows were identified, with a further 15–20 pairs (active burrows) round the lighthouse area. In that same year a pair of Tropical Shearwaters with an egg was discovered nesting within the main colony, the first breeding record of this species from the island.

Silhouette

In 2011 ICS opened another conservation centre at Silhouette, 20 km north of Mahé. Silhouette is the third largest and second highest island of the inner islands.

There is great diversity of habitat on the island, from coastal reef flats to mist forest. The whole of the 1,995 ha island is an IBA due to the significant breeding population of Seychelles Kestrel *Falco araeus* but there are few breeding seabirds other than small numbers of White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus*.

Farquhar Atoll

In 2014 ICS opened its most remote conservation centre, at Farquhar Atoll. Farquhar lies 770 km south-southwest of Mahé but only 200 km north-northeast of Madagascar. It is a low-lying flat, roughly circular atoll of ten islands surrounding a shallow lagoon which dries extensively at low tide. The two largest islands of Farquhar, Ile du Nord and Ile du Sud, together with three small intervening islands known as the Manahas, are heavily degraded and the presence of rats further reduces the value for seabirds. However, the remaining uninhabited islands of Farquhar Atoll are included in the Islets of Farquhar IBA. The island with the greatest ornithological interest is Goelettes, the most southerly point of land in Seychelles. In contrast to the other islands, Goelettes is almost treeless; it is covered in grasses, other short vegetation and a few *Scaevola taccada* bushes. ICS confirmed the return of Greater Crested Tern as a breeding species in 2017, at a new sandbank christened Banc Fantala in honour of the cyclone of the same name that created it in 2016 (Duhec *et al.* 2017).

Table 3. Key species of the Islets of Farquhar Important Bird Area in 2001.

Congregatory species	Breeding populations (range)
Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana*	10–30 pairs
Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscatus*	200,000–400,000 pairs

Source: Adapted from Rocamora and Skerrett, 2001.

Other islands

ICS has also conducted seabird surveys at all of the uninhabited outer islands of Seychelles. These include not only the government-owned islands, but also privately-owned St Joseph Atoll. Like St François Atoll, St Joseph Atoll was approved as a nomination for IBA recognition at a national workshop in 1998 (Rocamora and

Skerrett 1999) but later removed by BirdLife Seychelles (now Nature Seychelles) due to reservations over the adequacy of data. However, a 2005 survey by ICS confirmed the site meets the threshold criteria for three breeding species, Roseate Tern, Black-naped Tern and Wedge-tailed Shearwater. It also amply qualifies as a site for congregatory species (Skerrett & Skerrett 2005).

In 2013 and 2016, ICS undertook cruises with the generous assistance of the owner of MV *Pangaea*. Islands surveyed included Boudeuse on the western rim of the Amirantes, protected as a nature reserve and recognised as an IBA but almost certainly regularly poached in the absence of conservation staff. The 2013 *Pangaea* survey reported about 3,000 adult and 350 sub-adult Masked Booby and at least eight nesting sites of Brown Booby plus 13 individuals roosting (Rocamora 2013). This was the first report for about 50 years of Brown Booby breeding anywhere in Seychelles other than Cosmoledo. The 2016 expedition confirmed the breeding presence of Brown Booby and similar numbers of Masked Booby (Skerrett 2016a).

The 2013 expedition also visited African Banks and Étoile, both IBAs and both theoretically protected. African Banks held 40,300 pairs of Sooty Tern in 1955 (Ridley and Percy 1958), 20,300 pairs in 1974 (Feare 1979) and 5,000–10,000 pairs in 2001 (Rocamora and Skerrett 2001). The 2013 visit was outside the tern breeding season and no evidence was found, but it is possible this colony is already close to extinction or may even have been eradicated by uncontrolled poaching (G. Savy pers. comm.) If so, it no longer satisfies IBA criteria.

Plate 22 a. Masked Booby. **b.** Brown Booby. **c.** Red-footed Booby.

Étoile was declared an IBA based on a breeding population of 100–200 pairs of Roseate Tern; Sooty Tern also breeds but the population of about 5,000 pairs is below IBA criteria (Skerrett 1995). Due to the timing of the 2013 visit, the status of Roseate Tern remains unknown but the presence of one juvenile and one adult Sooty Tern very late in the season indicate that at least some still breed.

The 2016 *Pangaea* expedition visited Bancs Providence and recorded the first population estimates of breeding Greater Crested Tern and Black-naped Tern, both exceeding thresholds for consideration as an IBA (Skerrett 2016b). The non-breeding population of Crab Plover is close to and may regularly exceed the IBA threshold.

Why are some seabird populations declining but others increasing?

Monitoring of seabirds since the IBA Inventory was produced includes an annual census at Aride. Elsewhere, monitoring is relatively new and it is too early to draw conclusions. At Farquhar, a census was not possible in 2020 because COVID-19 restrictions meant an absence of conservation staff. Cosmoledo has not had a census since 2002. Even at Aride where populations have been monitored for several decades, firm conclusions are difficult to make. However, it is clear several populations have declined significantly despite protection. These include Sooty Tern, Roseate Tern and White-tailed Tropicbird. This rings alarm bells and the most recent management plan for Aride identifies the decline in seabirds as the major conservation concern, seabird populations being Aride's most significant biodiversity attribute (Betts 2020).

Plate 23 a. Roseate Terns. **b.** Copulating Black-naped Terns. **c.** Sooty Terns.

Plate 24. Crab Plovers.

Seabird declines of some species may be related to overfishing of predatory fish, notably tuna. Sooty Terns rely heavily on associations with predators such as tuna to catch baitfish prey chased to near the surface and the rapid expansion of industrialised tuna fisheries coincides with the period of decline. About 400,000 tons of tuna are caught by purse seiners annually in the southwest Indian Ocean, including about 80,000 tons in the Seychelles EEZ. EU-controlled fishing vessels have dominated the catch of Yellowfin Tuna *Thunnus albacares* for over 30 years. Today, the stock may be teetering on the verge of collapse; a plan to stop overfishing and restore it has failed. Seychelles benefits from fishing access fees, but other interests pocket most of the profits. EU ship owners pay up to €85 per ton of tuna. At the other extreme a ton of canned yellowfin retails for the equivalent of about €14,000, which means other parties are pocketing more than 99% of revenue generated for this product (Vyawahare 2021).

Jen Telesca, assistant professor of environmental justice at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York has documented how the Atlantic Bluefin Tuna became an endangered species, and how the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, an intergovernmental organization responsible for the management and conservation of tuna in the region, presided over what he calls "the managed extinction" of Atlantic Bluefin Tuna (Telesca 2020). History could be repeating itself in the Indian Ocean; EU fishing vessels moved there after the collapse of Atlantic tuna stocks.

Research at Ascension Island indicates a long term significant dietary shift of Sooty Terns during the second half of the twentieth century coinciding with an apparent population collapse of about 84%. Birds have grown more reliant on nutrient-poor squid and invertebrates as fish have declined in availability. As explained earlier, Sooty Terns rely heavily on associations with predators such as tuna to catch fish prey, and the rapid expansion of industrialised tuna fisheries over the same period seems a plausible mechanism. Climate change may also be implicated. This suggests that changes to marine ecosystems have had a dramatic impact on the ecology of the most abundant seabird of the tropical oceans and highlight the potentially pervasive consequences of large predatory fish depletion on marine ecosystems (Reynolds *et al.* 2019).

In 2019, ICS estimated the Sooty Tern population at Farquhar at 205,000 pairs, the lowest figure from surveys over a 5-year period, suggesting a decrease of about 80–90,000 pairs. The most credible reasons for such substantial declines are large-scale environmental pressures, such as seasonal food shortages, either natural or more likely linked to climate change and/or overfishing (Morgan *et al.* 2021).

Elsewhere the situation is complicated by natural factors. Sooty Terns have declined at Aride partly due to habitat loss. At one time, native vegetation was cleared to increase the area of open land for breeding birds and thereby increase the egg harvest. The price of allowing the natural vegetation to regenerate has been a reduction in breeding area. Poaching may also play a part and Sooty Tern eggs are frequently taken for local consumption. However, even this would not explain the apparent decline of other species that have not lost breeding habitat nor are regularly taken by poachers.

Legal collection of eggs is practiced in Seychelles. The Birds Eggs Act 1991 aimed to protect seabird eggs at all but three islands and to control collection of eggs of Sooty Tern and Brown Noddy. Annual quotas were set for collection of eggs of these two species at 30,000 for Bird Island, 70,000 for L'Ilot Frégate and an unlimited quota for Desnoeufs. However, the Bird Island quota was not respected and the quota for L'Ilot Frégate was probably always in excess of the number of breeding pairs. IDC demarcated part of Desnoeufs as a no-take zone, but collection was problematic due to the absence of an airstrip and dangerous seas, which resulted in several serious accidents. In 2020, the Birds' Eggs (Collection) Regulations amended quotas, repealing collection on L'Ilot Frégate, but adding a new quota for Cosmoledo of 800,000 and increasing the Bird Island legal quota from 30,000 to 600,000.

As far back as 1976, a major study recommended that in order for the egg harvest to be sustainable, it should be should be restricted to about 20% of the Seychelles Sooty Tern breeding population of the outer islands (Feare *et al.* 1996). The new legal quota for Cosmoledo represents about 40% of the number of breeding pairs in the outer islands and the Bird Island quota represents about 75% of the number of breeding pairs in the inner islands (based on Feare *et al.* 2007). Birds may lay more than once when an egg is lost, but quotas appear too high, even in a stable system.

Opinions differed as to the wisdom of the commencement of legal collection at Cosmoledo, an IBA and the largest Sooty Tern colony in Seychelles. In an online article, one local collector was quoted as saying, "They should have done this a long time ago as the island has many, many more birds than on Desnoeufs. It is a good decision because every year when the season opens it seems the demand always surpasses the supply." Comments from readers were less enthusiastic, such as "How long before alarm bells start ringing in this situation. These outdated historic traditions must stop in the modern age" (BirdGuides 2020). One thing both sides can agree on: demand exceeds supply.

The western Indian Ocean still supports over 6,200,000 pairs of Sooty Terns, by far the most common seabird of the region. During the past 200 years, the main drivers of population trends have been habitat change and unregulated human exploitation, so it has been argued even by scientists that regulated exploitation is sustainable (Feare *et al.* 2007). However, if external factors including overfishing and climate change are reducing food supply, sustainability may be impossible with or without an egg harvest. Collection up to the limit of legal quotas will only hasten population declines. The problem is that we do not know whether or not the system is stable; the indications are that is not.

In 2020 IDC could only collect fewer than 450,000 eggs at Cosmoledo over a period of nearly two months, little more than half the legal quota. IDC said it was "...one of the worst seasons in the collection of birds' eggs this year even though the birds were in abundance" (Joubert 2021). IDC presumed that a lack of food among other factors may

have had an impact on the birds' reproduction cycle. It was decided to stop collection for one year in 2021 in order to assess the national population and take stock of what is happening. ICS, IDC and Ministry of Environment are collaborating in the first national census of all Sooty Tern colonies in Seychelles while collection is suspended.

In contrast to declines in tern populations, some booby populations have increased since the IBA inventory was published. Historically, all booby species in the western Indian Ocean had lost 50% or more of their colonies during almost two centuries of exploitation, and those colonies that survived were significantly reduced in size (Feare 1978). However, with the cessation of exploitation, numbers have increased at some islands.

The Islets of Farquhar IBA inventory recorded a population of Red-footed Booby estimated at 50–70 pairs at the date of its declaration (Rocamora and Skerrett 2001). Today, there are over 9,000 pairs (Le Corre *et al.* 2021). Meanwhile, breeding has been recorded at Marie-Louise since 1997 (R Nolin, in a Ministry of Environment report now lost) and today at least 300 pairs breed. A single pair has bred at St François since 2019 indicating that this island may be next to be colonised (Curd 2021). The cessation of exploitation is undoubtedly a factor to explain increases, but the contrast with population trends for other species on protected islands is stark and may be partly explained by different feeding strategies. Boobies are not surface feeders, but plunge dive several metres, taking mainly flying fish and a small proportion of squid.

Wedge-tailed Shearwaters have also colonised new locations, despite feeding at or near the surface. These include Desroches, North Island and Denis. However, this spread appears to be mainly or entirely down to predator control rather than an increase in total population. Rats have been eradicated at North Island and Denis (under the ICS FFEM programme), while control measures have been implemented at Alphonse and Desroches. However, at protected Aride Island, where there never were any rats, numbers have declined. It is possible that the total population of breeding Wedge-tailed Shearwaters in Seychelles has declined but the number of breeding sites has increased; more work is needed before we know.

Plate 25. Wedge-tailed Shearwater.

Marine pollution and climate change are also undoubtedly having wide-ranging effects on marine ecosystems and seabird populations. Fewer than 5% of seabirds studied in 1960 were found to have plastic in their stomachs. By 1980, this number had rocketed to 80% and is forecast to rise to 99% by 2050. ICS monitors plastic pollution but so far has no idea of the scale of impact on seabird populations in Seychelles. Then of course there is climate change. This is a huge subject beyond the scope of this paper, but warming sea temperatures may be dramatically reducing food supply for seabirds in Seychelles.

Twenty years of seabird monitoring in Seychelles is just a small beginning, a drop in the proverbial ocean. We are witnessing, but do not yet understand, the causes of deep perturbations in the system. ICS monitoring and conservation seabird work are indicating trends in populations which are sometimes dramatic. Previously unknown or poorly known populations of seabirds have been discovered. We know that protection and eradication of predators works, but on their own these measures are not enough. Threats to seabirds, especially with regard to food supply, are alarming and are almost certainly due to wider problems that require international support if we are to find solutions. This is beyond a small NGO such as ICS, but ICS can at least ring the alarm bells.

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Adrian Skerrett, Chairman, Island Conservation Society
Email: askerrett@hotmail.com

A new paper describes improved fledging rates of Cory's Shearwater on Selvagem Grande

by Dr Frank Zino, Manuel José Biscoito & Alan Buckle

Selvagem Grande in the north-east Atlantic, set between the island of Madeira to the north and the Canaries to the south, has the world's largest breeding colony of Cory's shearwater *Calonectris borealis*, with 29,450 breeding pairs estimated to be present in 2005 (Granadeiro *et al.* 2006). This shearwater is a Species of European Conservation Concern (SPEC), SPEC category 2 (concentrated in Europe), with a threat status of 'depleted' (Birdlife International 2017), and has been the subject of a long-term population study conducted by Paul A Zino, his son Dr Frank Zino and other ornithologists covering almost 50 years (see Zino *et al.* 1987). Two mammalian alien invasive species (European rabbit *Oryctologus cuniculus* and house mouse *Mus musculus*) were removed from the island in a remarkable eradication programme conducted during 2002–2003 by the Instituto de Florestas e Conservação da Natureza (IFCN) (formerly Parque Natural da Madeira, PNM) (Oliviera *et al.* 2010).

After a preliminary assessment (Zino *et al.* 2008), a new and comprehensive paper describing the substantial beneficial effects of the eradications on the breeding performance of Cory's shearwater on Selvagem Grande (Zino *et al.* 2021) will be published later this year in the open access journal Oryx (DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605321000661). By comparing fledging rates during 14 years prior to eradication and 19 years after it, the authors found that, although fledging fluctuated from year to year, the mean rate after the eradication (52.9%) was considerably higher than that before it (40.7%). The authors were unable to be certain which factors had been operating to depress fledging because the two mammals were removed simultaneously. However, the predatory behaviour of mice on other oceanic islands (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePmlPpNND_g), and the fact that increased fledging was seen soon after the eradications were achieved, suggest direct predation by house mice on shearwater hatchlings was the main cause of losses.

The long-term studies of Cory's shearwater on Selvagem Grande, and the Zino family's work to protect the islands' birds from catastrophic culling and to establish the islands as a Nature Reserve, will be the subject of another article to be published in *Sea Swallow*.

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Dr Frank Zino (Freira Conservation Project, Madeira)
Email: fzino@netmadeira.com

Manuel José Biscoito (Natural History Museum, Funchal, Madeira)

Alan Buckle (University of Reading, UK)

RNBWS

RNBWS 75th ANNIVERSARY DINNER

On the 29th November 1946 a dozen Royal Navy birders got together in Whitehall, London to hold the first ever meeting of the newly formed Royal Naval Birdwatching Society. To celebrate the 75th anniversary of that occasion we are holding a dinner on Saturday the 27th November 2021 at the Wardroom, HMS *Nelson*, Portsmouth. This dinner is open to all members and their partners. There will be a presentation by Dr Nigel Hacking before the dinner on the Western Pacific Pelagic Odyssey.

Date:	27th November 2021
Location:	The Wardroom, HMS *Nelson*, Queen Street, Portsmouth PO1 3HL.
Rig:	Jacket and Tie, Ladies equivalent
Timings:	18:00 hrs - Bar opens 18:45 hrs - Presentation 20:00 hrs - Meal commences, on completion bar until 23:59 hrs.
Cost per head:	£40 (*subsidised by RNBWS*)

For more information, contact Mark Cutts at:
Tel: 07796840107 or Email: mark.cutts453@mod.gov.uk

Plate 26. Curlew and chick on nest. © *Curlew Country webcam*

The Curlew Country Project

by Lieutenant P Boak, RN

(*All photographs by the author except where indicated*)

Readers may feel that Curlews don't quite fit into the *Sea Swallow* mould, but this year the RNBWS provided a grant to support the Curlew Country Project (largely, it must be said, because of my own close personal involvement), and I think it is reasonable to wonder how the money was spent.

Plate 27. The author in the Curlew pen.

The Curlew Country Project is based in the Shropshire Hills and Powys borders, near my home, and taking part in the project has been a happy and rewarding leave-time activity for me. The aim of the project is simple: to reverse the decline in the local population of curlew.

The Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* is Britain's largest wading bird. Once common throughout the UK, recent trends show a decline in their numbers, and it is considered a bird of the highest conservation priority. The UK hosts around 25% of the world population, and alarmingly numbers here have declined by about 50% in recent years. Similar rapid declines across the rest of Europe have led the International Union for the Conservation of Nature to classify the Eurasian Curlew as 'vulnerable' on the European Red List, meaning that the species is at risk of extinction. In the

Plate 28. Juvenile Curlew group in headstarting project.

area of the Curlew Country Project we know that the curlew population has declined by over 30% in 11 years. However, on the plus side there still remains a 'hot spot' of some 40 pairs of breeding birds, and this is a nationally significant population.

The Curlew Country Project was established in 2015, and members work in close partnership with land managers, volunteers and the wider community to promote the conservation of the species. During the first two years, nest monitoring revealed that no chicks survived to fully fledge from over 30 nests studied, and the reason was that almost all the eggs and chicks were subject to predation. It is pleasing to be able to report now that this trend toward local curlew extinction has been reversed by Curlew Country's pioneering work, including 'headstarting'. In this process, curlew eggs are carefully removed under license from first batch nests. These are carefully incubated and the chicks reared in predator-free conditions. The adults are then released, and in one fell swoop provide a massive boost to the local curlew population. Of course, such intensive and intrusive methods are not a long-term solution for the curlew, and there will be a need for predator control and habitat management to ensure long-term recovery. This we know will require a concerted effort from the many stakeholders, and we also know that predator control is not without controversy. Despite this, we fervently hope that the long decline in curlew in our area can be halted and indeed reversed, allowing these evocative birds to be enjoyed by generations to come.

For those wishing to find out more, please visit: https://curlewcountry.org

Philip Boak
Email: swordfish200@aol.com

Plate 29. The Sandy Bay foreshore, showing the cleft through to the west coast of the island. © *Keith Betton*

Macquarie Island - a super run ashore

by Commander AY Norris, FRGS

Macquarie Island, roughly a third of the way between the southern tip of New Zealand and the Antarctic Continent is well described in *Sea Swallow 68*, pages 49–61. We were en route to the Antarctic, and spent a day visiting this fascinating island. Our ship, the *Professor Khromov*, anchored in Sandy Bay on the east side of the island in 13 fathoms of water, and as a former navigator I noticed from the chart that just a mile further east the depth was nearly 1,000 fathoms. Anchoring in places like this can be mind-blowing!

On deck early on 17 January 2019, the weather was calm. Hands were called for landing at about 1000, and our Zodiac made its way through a dense expanse of kelp to make a wet landing at 1015. I picked my way to the head of the beach walking among noisy King Penguins *Aptenodyte patagonicus* in their hundreds and the *caaa-ing* of Royals *Eudyptes schlegeli* in their thousands. Not having seen the Royals before, I spent a few minutes close to two birds, looking at the detail of their fittings and plumage. They did not seem to object.

Lying on dry sand high on the beach were numbers of Southern Elephant Seals *Mirounga leonine* - I counted 73 in the immediate area. Mainly moulting females, they were arranged in small groups lying close together. There were also some youngish looking bulls, and I watched two of them rearing up and protesting loudly. There didn't seem to be any signs of damage round their heads and necks from this activity.

A few yards further on I came upon two New Zealand Fur Seals *Arctocephalus forsteri* settled quietly. One of them raised itself up as I passed, its head alert, its swept back whiskers reminding me of a moustached sergeant major.

We next had a stiffish climb up onto the plateau and made our way to what turned out to be a vast colony of Royals on the north side of a wide cleft in the land which stretched across the island to the western coast.

Figure 1. Macquarie Island. © *Ultima Thule*

It was a stupendous sight: penguins everywhere - adults, sub-adults and youngsters, thousands upon thousands of them, their concentration stretching up into the distance, their calling loud and insistent. I learned that the local biologists from the Australian research centre at the northern tip of the island put the population here at 40,000. As I expected, skuas were patrolling the colony, looking for a meal or two. An adult settled alongside me and I got a splendid look at an intermediate morph South Polar/ MacCormick's bird *Stercorarius maccormicki*.

I very much enjoyed watching pairs of Royal Penguins greeting one another, their colourful heads in co-ordinated close motion, thrown to and fro, but never touching, and *caaa-ing* loudly throughout. Such is their form of courtship! Other individuals were making their various ways through the noisy throng; some were sitting on eggs, some were moulting, and some were just chicks, with darkish grey upperparts and white beneath. There were birds with clean white breasts coming from the sea with food, and others with dirty breasts having fed youngsters, making their journeys along well used pathways through the grass to the beach and the sea below.

Climbing down to the beach, I found numbers of Macquarie Shags *Leococarbo purpurascens* with bright blue eyes settled on waterline rocks, while overhead six or seven Light-mantled Albatross *Phoebetria palpebrata* patrolled in their wonderful close flight patterns.

I was one of the last to leave this spectacular place. The slopes were bright green in the late morning sunshine, the dark grey rock surfaces partly covered with mustard-coloured lichen. The long view from above the penguin colony across the island westwards and the calm ocean beyond had been just unforgettable.

It was 1245, the sun out, the cloud five eighths, the breeze Force 1–2 as I climbed the ship's ladder. I went aft to clean my boots and soon after lunch was called. Meanwhile, the ship weighed anchor and steamed northwards along the coast to anchor to the eastwards of the isthmus whereon is situated the Australian Antarctic Programme Station, our position then in Buckles Bay. Viney describes Macquarie as treacherous for shipping, and his map of the bit of coastline where the *Professor* had steamed showed six wrecks, the last the *Nella Dan* in 1987.

Looked at from the ship and between the northern end of the plateau southwards and Wireless Hill northwards, the isthmus looked to about three quarters of a mile long and two hundred yards wide. The approach to the shore was again through a wide belt of kelp, and once again, we had to make a wet landing.

At first, the staff led us to the steep slope under the edge of the plateau and began a long climb to view the scene. I decided that this was not for me, Instead, I walked along the beach among huge tussock grasses, within which many Elephant Seals were hidden. From time to time I found myself passing them close to, when they regarded me with a baleful eye as if to say, "What are you doing here? Do not disturb; I have enough to put up with".

Later, I crossed to the other side of the sandy beach of the isthmus to find myself among a large number of widely dispersed Gentoo Penguins *Pygoscelis papua*, with several Kings down by the water. Since seeing numbers of Gentoos on the Antarctic Peninsula in 1994 these birds have remained special for me. Here, they looked good in the sunshine, and unconcerned by human presence as I and now others made our way northwards towards Wireless Hill and the Australian research station with its enormous communications globe. I estimated three hundred Gentoos well spread out along the isthmus, while on black rocks offshore were at least 120 shags. Light-mantled Albatrosses cruised overhead, as did the inevitable skuas.

Arriving in the scientific area, we were invited to enjoy a cup of tea in the dining hall which had a small shop for postcards, Australian books and pamphlets; the ladies dressed nicely as if they might be working in a shop in Canberra.

Plate 30. Ashore at Sandy Bay. © *Keith Betton*

Plate 31. Isthmus and Australian Research Station. © *Australian Govt.*

Suitably refreshed. I walked from the research centre on a south-going track among the tussock to join the zodiac, which I thought was returning to the ship. It was, but not yet. The cox'n of the Zodiac set off northwards towards some rocky cliffs below Wireless Headland where, to my surprise, there was a group of Rockhopper Penguins. The smallest of the crested penguins, these here were termed Eastern Rockhoppers *Eudyptes chrzysocome filholi* - having seen them on Bleaker Island in the Falklands I had no idea there was any sub-distinction. I counted 28 of them with their yellow tasselled plumes. Afterwards, as we were cruising back to the ship, we came upon a magnificent bull Elephant seal, perhaps 15 to 16 feet in length, its proboscis huge. Judith King (1983) writes that mature bulls come ashore to moult between December and February.

It was about 1645 when I returned on board, in comfortable time for a decent G&T and dinner.

Weighing anchor in Buckles Bay at 0830 next day, and with an angry blow pushing an impressive following sea, the ship made for Lusitania Bay towards the southern limit of the island. About a mile and a half of shoreline of this bay was an astonishing sight of countless thousands of King Penguins packed seemingly tightly and in depth. I had learnt that the careful estimate of the staff at the Isthmus station was for 600,000 birds at this breeding place.

We departed at about mid-day, and there was no doubt about it; Macquarie Island had been a great run ashore.

Tony Norris, 20 Wallington Shore Road, Wallington Village, Fareham, Hants PO16 8SL.

Plate 32. Welcome to Midway sign.

Midway Atoll - home to spectacular wildlife

by Simon Cook
(*All photographs by the author*)

In the late 1990s I spent a great deal of time in Texas and during one of my extended visits I flew to Hawaii for the second time, for some additional birding. Whilst there I flew on for another four hours from Kauai to Midway Atoll to live for a week amongst countless numbers of albatrosses. Staff from the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) told me that there were an astonishing 430,000 pairs of Laysan Albatross, 90,000 pairs of Sooty Terns, 64,000 pairs of Bonin Petrels, 60,000 pairs of Black-footed Albatross, 18,000 pairs of Red-tailed Tropicbirds, and 3,000 pairs of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters plus various other forms of wildlife. Another reason for my visit was that there was the possibility of seeing the near-extinct and mythical Steller's Albatross, one of which was sometimes present. In my notebook at the end of my stay I wrote, "Midway is the most impressive place that I have ever been to," and that still holds true today.

Famous for the hard-fought, bitter but pivotal naval battle of WW2, Midway had not long been open to the public at the time of my visit in February 1997. A few years later it was closed down, re-opened and then closed again to the general public. When Midway was downgraded from a Naval Air Station to a Naval Air Facility the Fish and Wildlife people were keen to get the public onto the wildlife-rich outer Hawaiian islands, and having a runway, Sand Island in the Midway Atoll was the obvious choice. In September 1996 the USFWS and the privately-owned Midway Phoenix Corporation signed an agreement for the operation and management of Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge. Visitors were able to go sport fishing, scuba diving or for general and wildlife tourism. My interest was the wildlife, and a concise introduction to both it and the island may be found in Otto Plantema's Pacific Albatrosses article in *Sea Swallow,* Volume 61 (2012).

Midway is the remnant of an ancient volcano, 25–30 million years old, and it was formed by the same volcanic hotspot that created the other Hawaiian Islands. It was discovered in 1859, annexed by the US in 1867 and protected from Japanese poachers and squatters by President Roosevelt in 1903. Then the new cable station enabled the first 'around the world' message (by the President) to be sent a few months later. In 1935 an air base was set up for the weekly Trans-Pacific Flying Clipper Seaplane service of Pan-American World Airways. Construction of the WW2 military facilities commenced in March 1940 and they were officially commissioned on 1 August 1941. In December 1941 Japanese ships returning from the attack on Pearl Harbour shelled Midway's military installations. Four people were killed, one of whom was WW2's first Marine Corps recipient of the Medal of Honor. Another interesting fact that emerged during my visit was that Midway was not part of the state of Hawaii, so even US visitors had to bring proof of citizenship so that they could 'get back in'.

Prior to being opened to the public much clearance and conservation work had been undertaken. This included the demolition of dangerous/derelict structures, the removal of tons of scrap metal from the ocean, the filling-in of trenches and culverts to prevent bird entrapment, the control and removal of invasive and alien plant species, rat eradication, the removal of underground fuel tanks and the removal of hazardous waste. In addition, a re-vegetation nursery for native species and re-vegetation plots was established. My visit was booked through Oceanic Society Expeditions of San Francisco. Visitors numbers were limited to 30 but this was increased a few months later to 100, when most of the clean-up work had been completed and when the last military personnel had been withdrawn. In conjunction with biologists from the USFWS it was also possible to participate as a volunteer in a variety of programmes, including the Coral Reef Research & Reef Restoration Project, the Spinner Dolphin Research Project, the Hawaiian Monk Seal Monitoring & Recovery Project and the Seabird Monitoring Project.

The military learnt the hard way that one of the best ways to avoid potential loss of life and the considerable damage to aircraft (especially their engines) from bird-strikes was to fly at night. I was told of an incoming jet that was carrying a new engine for a disabled plane and was then disabled itself. My flights therefore arrived and departed during the hours of darkness. Upon landing, I still remember the ghostly images of albatrosses at the edge of the runway, briefly illuminated by the landing lights of the 19-seater, twin-engined, Gulfstream G-1 turboprop

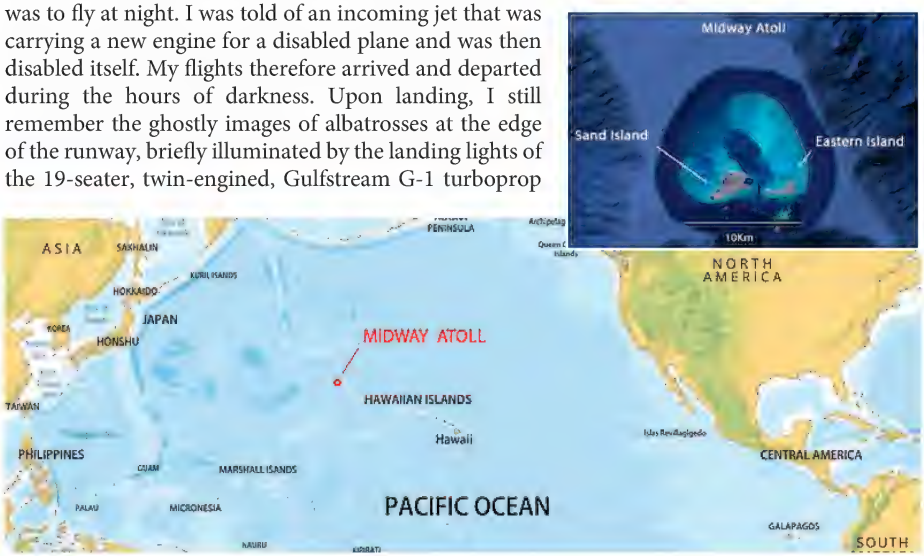
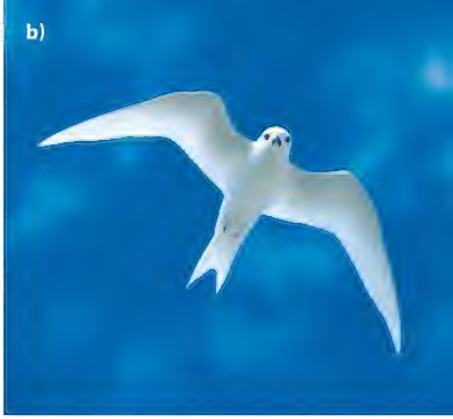


Figure 1. Location of Midway Atoll. © *Google Earth*

a)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aircraft. One of my subsequent fellow visitors was an American lister, who had only gone to Midway to see the Steller's Albatross. Unfortunately for him, his far too short hit-and-run visit coincided with one of his target's feeding trips.

The former Bachelor Officer Quarters on Sand Island had been turned into visitor accommodation and my room was on the ground floor. The lawn outside was covered by nesting albatrosses and the noise continued unabated, day and night. It was fantastic! The entrance doors at either end of the building were left open so it was not unusual to see an albatross waddling along the corridor from one end to the other. One day a volunteer working party arrived to help with wildlife survey work and to help eradicate introduced plant species, and I happened to be talking to staff in the reception and briefing room when they came in. Quite astonishingly, one lady obviously recognised me, and it transpired that we had been on the same ship the year before, on a voyage to Antarctica.

Sand Island was only just big enough for an airstrip (3 square miles) so although golf carts were available for hire, I chose to walk or to use a bicycle. Even cycling had its unexpected hazards though. One night I had been out watching hundreds of Bonin Petrels returning to their burrows at Cross Point. Cycling home, a bird flew straight into my face, so I decided that it was much safer to push the bike instead. At low airspeed albatrosses are not very manoeuvrable, as a fellow visitor found out. Sitting in a deckchair on the beach, facing the ocean, he was almost knocked unconscious by a bird that hit the back of his head. And I saw a landing albatross hit the trunk of a palm tree and fall onto its back on the ground, looking somewhat bemused!

There was rain all day on my first day (part of a yearly average of 42") but I wasn't put off exploring and seeing as much as possible. In addition to the two breeding species of albatross, which were everywhere, the tally for the day included Indo-Pacific White Noddy (formerly White Tern; one almost landed on my umbrella), wintering Ruddy Turnstone, Wandering Tattler, Pacific Golden Plover and Bristle-thighed Curlew (which I was told were particularly fond of mice), Common Brown Noddy and Red-tailed Tropicbird. The plovers were very easy to approach but the curlews were a little warier. More excitement came in the form of my first-ever Green Turtle at the boat dock, my first-ever Hawaiian Monk Seal (one of only about 40 here) and, most exciting and spectacular of all, my first ever Steller's Albatross.

The seal population was only an estimated 1,200 and they had probably never been common, as there was no native Hawaiian name for them. Highly sensitive to disturbance on land, other threats included oil spills, sharks, entanglement in fishing nets, long-line hooks and plastic. Typically, they are at sea for 2–14 days and then they haul out on beaches for a couple of days. Among 35 prey species are squid, octopus and sea cucumbers. The single Steller's Albatross took some finding amongst the hundreds of thousands of Black-footed and Laysans but it was huge, dwarfing its relatives. Although it was a young adult female (nine years old), she still had a brown hind-crown and nape. The face, sides of the neck and forecrown were gold and the huge pink bill had a blue tip - an extraordinarily impressive bird. When I searched for her the next day (still raining) she had gone out to sea to feed. I didn't see her again until the afternoon of my last day, when I spent 80 minutes watching her sitting, walking around and wing-stretching.

Opposite: Plate 33 a. Bonin Petrel. **b.** White Tern. **c.** Pacific Golden Plover. **d.** Bristle-thighed Curlew. **e.** Hawaiian Monk Seal. **f.** Green Turtle. **g.** Steller's Albatross. **h.** Steller's Albatross.

Plate 34. Laysan in flight.

Plate 35. Albino Laysan chick.

At the time of my visit the Midway Laysans accounted for 73% of the world population, and one day I accompanied some of the volunteers to Laysan Albatross nests. Eighteen 20 m x 20 m plots in different habitats had been marked out and there were up to 80 nests in each plot. Each nest was mapped and numbered, with the numbers painted on a red stone. A ring number was allocated to each chick, which at one month old was given a plastic ring and at two months old a standard metal ring. The island is still home to Wisdom, a female Laysan Albatross that is at least 69 years old - the oldest-known ringed bird. I estimated that while I was there, there could have been up to a phenomenal million Laysan Albatrosses present - 430,000 pairs, plus all of their chicks, plus all of the non-breeding birds!

During my remaining days on the island very few new species were added to the trip list, apart from introduced canaries. For example: "27/2 Sand Island, same species as yesterday plus three Yellow-billed (White-tailed) Tropicbirds, a single Brewster's Brown Booby, ten Pacific Black Noddies and three wayward Northern Pintail". At the time of writing 179 species have been recorded but the majority are vagrants. My first-ever Spinner Dolphins were also seen, a group of about 50, and they certainly performed in accordance with their name. They were part of a resident group of 2–300. More than 20 years later the taxonomy of the latter has still not been resolved but these were Gray's Spinner Dolphins. One impressive animal that I didn't see was a Tiger Shark; the largest recorded in Hawaii was 18 feet in length. I was too early in the breeding season - some unexplained sixth sense causes them to congregate around Midway to prey on fledging albatrosses, as many youngsters invariably have to take to the water to take off into the air.

Opposite: Plate 36 a. Old bachelor officer quarters. **b.** A curious Laysan. **c.** The author at work. **d.** Laysan Albatross colony. **e.** Courting pair of Laysan Albatross. **f.** Adult Laysan feeding chick. **g.** Laysan chick. **h.** Volunteers ringing a Laysan chick.

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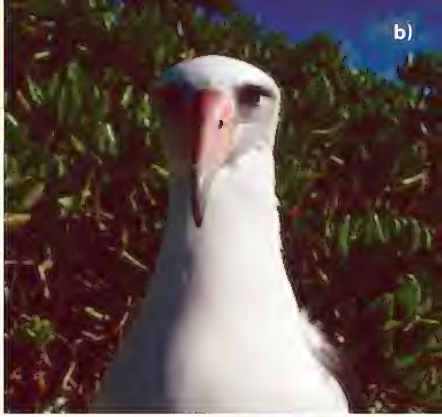
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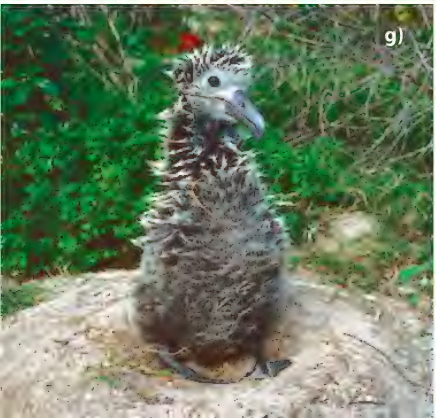
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One day, from Sand Island, I saw several thousand Sooty Terns circling above adjacent Eastern Island; they had presumably just arrived, prior to breeding. A boat trip had been organised for the following day but the 5,000 or so birds were still circling disappointingly high overhead. The boat was greeted at the dock by a 40-day-old, newly weaned but curious Monk Seal. On eastern Island was a mixture of birds, long-abandoned and overgrown roadways and mature bushes. Two species of seabird not found on Sand Island were nesting - Red-footed Booby and Great Frigatebird. A close approach was not possible, due to the density of petrel and shearwater burrows but good views were had of displaying male frigatebirds, their red gular pouches fully inflated. Other frigates and boobies were in the air above me. Not all was well, though. As on Sand Island, there were numerous remains of albatrosses to be seen, and many had starved to death, as evidenced by the amount of plastic where the stomachs had been. Pictures of these albatrosses have since been at the forefront of efforts to reduce the amount of plastic being dumped into the environment, both on land and at sea.

Plate 38. Ingested plastic.

All too soon my time at this extraordinary place was up and I had to return to the main islands. Although I have made numerous visits to other spectacular concentrations of seabirds, such as the huge King Penguin colonies on South Georgia and auk cliffs in the North Atlantic, nothing has beaten my time on Midway Atoll. The turquoise lagoon, white beaches and blue skies (when it stopped raining!) were a delight. To be living amongst, walking amongst and just sitting amongst countless numbers of albatrosses was almost overwhelming. My time on Midway can thus be summed up in three words - unprecedented, unparalleled and unforgettable.

Simon Cook
Email: cookbirder@hotmail.com

Appendix 1. Scientific names of species mentioned (seabird names follow *Oceanic Birds of the World*, Howell & Zufelt, 2019).

King Penguin *Aptenodytes patagonicus*
Bonin Petrel *Pterodroma hypoleuca*
Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Ardenna pacifica*
Laysan Albatross *Phoebastria immutabilis*
Black-footed Albatross *Phoebastria Nigripes*
Steller's Albatross *Phoebastria albatrus*
Red-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon rubricauda*
Yellow-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus*
Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor*
Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*
Brewster's Brown Booby *Sula brewsteri*
Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscatus*
Indo-Pacific White Noddy *Gygis candida*
Common Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*
Pacific Black Noddy *Anous minutus*
Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*
Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*
Bristle-thighed Curlew *Numenius tahitiensis*
Wandering Tattler *Heteroscelus incanus*
Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*
Green Turtle *Chelonia mydas*
Tiger Shark *Galeocerdo cuvier*
Hawaiian Monk Seal *Neomonachus schauinslandi*
Gray's Spinner Dolphin *Stenella longirostris*

Opposite: 37 a. Red-footed Boobies. **b.** Red-footed Booby on nest. **c.** Male Great Frigatebirds. **d.** Juvenile Great Frigatebird. **e.** Red-tailed Tropicbirds. **f.** Nesting Red-tailed Tropicbird. **g.** Ringed Black-footed Alabatross. **h.** Black-footed Albatross.

Plate 39. The barrage.

A day at the Murray River Barrages, South Australia

by Warrant Officer Steve Copsey
(*All photographs by the author*)

As I mentioned in the last edition of *Sea Swallow*, Mark Cutts and I spent six weeks in the autumn (austral spring) of 2019 birding around Australia. We spent ten days of this ornithological extravaganza based in Encounter Bay, a small coastal town just south of Adelaide in South Australia, where our generous host was long time RNBWS member and good friend Neil Cheshire. We were joined by fourth member Tony Tindale for this phase of the trip, and the four of us spent the whole period in the field, pretty much birding from dawn till dusk, taking in as many habitats as possible, from the coastal wetlands and woodlands to the desert of the southern interior.

What follows is a short note about one of our days spent along the coast from Encounter Bay at Goolwa.

Plate 40. (left to right) Steve Copsey, Mark Cutts, Tony Tindale, Neil Cheshire.

The Murray River Barrages at Goolwa separate Lake Alexandrina from the sea at the mouth of the river Murray and the Coorong. They were constructed principally to reduce salinity levels in the lower reaches of the River Murray, Lake Alexandrina and Lake Albert, but also to stabilise the river level for upstream irrigation.

We had good numbers of seabirds at the barrage. Terns in particular were very evident, along with smaller numbers of gulls, cormorants, grebes and pelicans. The most numerous species by far was Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*, probably numbering into four figures. Many of these were dip feeding on the freshwater side of the barrage whilst others roosted on the barrage's fixtures and fittings. Little and Crested Terns *Sterna albifrons* and *S. bergii* were also present as well as one species we really wanted to see: Fairy Tern *S. nereis*, a close relative to Little Tern. Fortunately for us around a dozen birds were seen feeding on the seaward side of the barrage.

Plate 41 a. Fairy Tern. **b.** Whiskered Tern. **c.** Little Tern. **d.** Crested Tern.

Plate 42 a. Little Black Cormorant. **b–c.** Australian Pelican and Silver Gull. **d.** Hoary-headed Grebe.

We witnessed some good interaction at the Goolwa Barrage between Australian Pelicans *Pelicanus conspicillatus* and Silver Gulls *Larus novaehollandiae*. But before I jump ahead; the barrage itself has sections all along its length. These sections can be raised or lowered to keep water depth and flow at the required level. On the landward side of the barrage the water is fresh coming down the Murray River; no guesswork required to know that on the seaward side of the barrage the water is saline. We stood near to where one of these sections had been lifted and there was quite a flow of fresh water through the barrage into the sea. The strong current was forcing freshwater fish through the barrier and once on the sea side they become disorientated, making easy pickings for predators.

The Australian Pelicans took full advantage of this situation and we observed several birds feeding below our vantage point. Each pelican had an attendant Silver Gull. The gull would stay in very close proximity, attempting to steal a morsel or two as the pelican was draining water from its pouch before swallowing its catch. I didn't actually witness the Silver Gulls getting any scraps whilst I watched but the fact that every pelican had its own gull must indicate the strategy works for them from time to time.

Steve Copsey
Email: librarian@rnbws.org.uk

Plate 43. The team. © *Martin Alabaster*

Expedition Simmer Dim 2021

by Captain S Chapman, MN

Thwarted by COVID-19, all efforts to complete survey work for the national seabird count in 2020 were put on hold, and with changing rules and regulations on both sides of the border it was touch and go if we could cover the ground and complete a census of breeding seabirds this year. In the event, a team of 12 volunteers - a tri-service team - all double vaccinated and COVID-19 tested, headed north to take the overnight NorthLink ferry from Aberdeen to Lerwick and land on Shetland on 13 June. *Sea Swallow* readers may recall that work in 2019 was split between a base at Bridge End, West Burra, (Chapman 2019 and Cowieson 2020) and another at Voxter House, Brae to the north.

For this continuation of the national Seabird Monitoring Programme our mission was to survey the northern part of Mainland in the parishes of Delting, Lunnasting, Nesting and Northmavine, working from the single base of Voxter House. The house was built as a Church of Scotland Manse and glebe in 1868 and found a new life as an outdoor centre when Robbie Hughson, the last owner, bequeathed it to the Shetland people. Self-catering and dormitory accommodation fostered effective team-building right from the start of the deployment.

This short report does not give results from the surveys; it is too soon for that, for the data needs to be uploaded and analysed. Presented here is an overview and commentary on the process and challenges faced in this final leg of the National Seabird Survey. The full account will be published in *Sea Swallow 71*.

Deployment

The RNBWS contingent comprised Martin Alabaster, Lee Lapin, the author of this report and a recent recruit, Group Captain Keith Cowieson, who now has a foot in both RNBWS and RAFOS camps. The Army Ornithological Society's representative was John Hughes of Ascension Island renown, and our fully qualified 'A' class ringer and trainer was RAFOS member George Candelin. Overall we were a very mixed ability tri-services team, both in terms of survey experience and fitness to conquer the rough peat bog terrain that covers much of Mainland Shetland. However, thanks to the excellent Operation Order of our leader Keith Cowieson, with its clear instructions, delegation and sensitivity to the needs of the team, each day unfolded smoothly with pairs dispatched to the target survey areas. We were split into two teams of six, and it was made clear at the outset that all participants were expected to serve as observers, cooks, cleaners - and tern, gull and skua targets.

Each evening we had a round table team planning session after dinner, and laid out the plan for the following day, delegating areas that surveyors would cover. This plan was then reviewed the next morning with teams deciding how their areas would be traversed to cover the maximum amount of the square. One pair would stay with the minibus to meet and redeploy a pair when sections of one kilometre squares were completed, and also to survey terrain more accessible from the roadside. Keith's 4x4 vehicle was a great asset for getting surveyors to the top of a ridge or other high point, reducing the climbing needed and making best use of effort and time. We needed permissions from landowners to use some of these unmetalled tracks, and they took time and Keith's diplomacy to organise. We had radios to make contact with transport and other teams. Martin's use of Google Earth gave advance information on the type of terrain that Ordnance Survey Explorer maps do not have, and we quickly learnt that grassland improved for sheep grazing was unlikely to support gull colonies or skuas, whose domain was the brown coloured rolling wet peaty bogs.

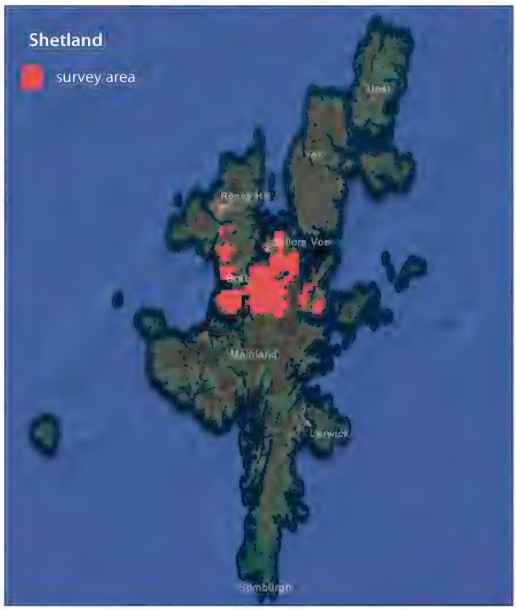

Figure 1. Survey areas in Shetland. © *Adapted from Google Earth*

Surveying

Seemingly arcane procedures for recording data were less mystifying this year, the author having participated in the 2019 expedition. Data collected in the field and recorded on a Dictaphone (Martin) or in a field note book (author) was passed to the central logging system each evening. Position data was taken from the OS Locate app, Garmin GPS or Outdoor Active app, which in addition to position data overlays track covered on an OS Map. Whilst it was not a priority we did also note species other than seabirds, and these were logged on BTO Birdtrack by 10 km square. One notable excitement was the discovery of a flock of Common Crossbills *Loxia curvirostra* in a small area of mixed tree planting near Brae.

Essentially the surveying can be split into two very different terrains. The first

Plate 44. Red-throated Diver. © *Stephen Chapman*

is the peat hag of rolling wet or waterlogged uneven ground, both close to the sea coast or further inland at around 100–200 m ASL, often with old peat workings; all making for a very uneven terrain. This was the domain of skuas and Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*, and on the lochs Red-throated Divers *Gavia stellata*. Then there were the sea cliffs and offshore stacks providing sites for Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*, guillemots *Cepphus sp* and Cormorants *Phalacrocorax sp*. These seemed easier for access but included some challenging climbs and descents as we followed the shoreline to look into jagged rock inlets and over the stacks. Not everything that looks like a seabird nest is indeed one, as we discovered when a nest with three hungry gapes on closer inspection turned out to be Hooded Crows *Corvus cornix*. I teamed up with Martin for a one day's west coast survey including North Ham, Erne Stack and Roda Geo and achieved a count of over 800 Fulmar AON (apparently occupied nests) and 137 Cormorants *P. carbo*. Clearly predation of nests is a common hazard of breeding here as we came across a feeding area of empty eggshells recently taken from Cormorants, a Black Guillemot *C. grylle* and a Fulmar.

Of lesser importance as an area for nesting skuas is the ancient Arctic-Alpine fell-field-type terrain around the highest part of Shetland. A hit squad of Keith, Martin, John Wells and the author made the ascent from the ancient whaling base at Colla Firth and Voe of Brig, via the car park at the telecomms aerial site towards Ronas Hill, the peak of which is at 450 m. The terrain is largely dry, weather eroded, boulder strewn and featuring sparse stunted ground of rare Arctic plants. We noted Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*, Skylark *Alauda arvensis*, Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* (with food), Golden Plover

Plate 45. Cormorant eggshells. © *Stephen Chapman*

Plate 46. Martin Alabaster in Bonxie territory. © *Stephen Chapman*

Pluvialis apricaria and Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* (the last with chicks). A mega tick Snowy Owl *Bubo scandiacus* was clearly watching us and showed for others to report just two hours after we descended from Mid Field, 373 m.

Loch of Spiggie and Sumburgh Head

With surveys essentially completed, except around the Sullom Voe Oil facility for which the necessary permissions did not come through in time, a party took the mini-bus south to the Loch of Spiggie, a well-known hotspot for migrants. However, on a damp grey overcast day it was a seabird that took our attention - a party of at least 30 Bonxies *Stercorarius skua* bathing in the middle of the loch, and a further gathering of 20 loafing on the grass. Birds left the shore to join the bathers and bathers departed elsewhere. In our travels and from the ferry we saw just the usual single birds at sea and pairs at nest sites. Simon Cook comments that he has seen similar gatherings of skuas in the southern hemisphere. Such social behaviour is presumably of non-breeding immature birds. Brian Lyon reports that the high count this year for Spiggie is 70 birds (https://ebird.org/species/gresku1/GB-SCT-ZET).

Plate 47. Bonxies at Loch of Spiggie. © *Brian Lyon*

Plate 48. Atlantic Puffin. © *Stephen Chapman*

With poor visibility Sumburgh Head looked to be a disappointment. The RSPB café, shop and lookout were closed, not because of the COVID-19 pandemic but because it was a Wednesday. Nevertheless, we trekked up the hill to the lighthouse to enjoy close-up views of nesting Fulmar, Cormorants and Puffins *Fratercula arctica*, and on the way a Bonxie feeding on a hapless Fulmar.

The stunning views of so many seabirds at close range even in the mist made a fitting end to our survey and expedition.

Finances

The cash costs for mounting an expedition of this type of course go beyond feeding the volunteers and transport. Deployment, survey and recovery phases totalled 14 days. The west coast routed RAF mini-bus covered 1,800 miles, as did another RAF mini-bus which took the easterly route. Volunteers covered their own feeding costs, each contributing to a share of the total victualling spend. In addition volunteers supported the project with a personal contribution of £200 per head. RNBWS made a grant £300 to the budget towards the hire of two vehicles, fuel, ferries and Voxter accommodation. Other grants came from the Seabird Group and RAFOS against a total projected expenditure (excluding food) of £6,789.

Plate 49. The author and Martin Alabaster on Ronas Hill. © *Keith Cowieson*

Plate 50. The author surveying northern part of Muckle Roe. © *Martin Alabaster*

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Chapman S (2019). Simmer dim 2: RAFOS/RNBWS seabird census, Shetland June 2019. *Sea Swallow* 68: 15–18.

Cowieson K (2020). RAFOS/RNBWS Expedition to Mainland Shetland, June 2019 - results of seabird count, year 2. *Sea Swallow* 69: 24–29.

Stephen Chapman
Email: data@rnbws.org.uk

Appendix 1. Expedition Teams.

Team 1
Keith Cowieson
Martin Alabaster
George Candelin
Stephen Chapman
Brian Lyon
Dave Thomas

Team 2
John Wells
Sue Berrecloth
Mark Hollis
John Hughes
Iain Mackenzie
Lee Lappin

Birding on HMS *Prince of Wales*

by Warrant Officer A Tindale, BSc

Plate 51. The author on board HMS *Prince of Wales*. © *Tony Tindale*

I am what is called a Sea Rider, or FOSTie. My role as a senior technical rating is to train and assure Weapon Engineering Department teams of surface warships during their Operational Sea Training, and on Sunday 6 June 21 I found myself sailing from Portsmouth on board the Royal Navy's high readiness Strike Carrier HMS *Prince of Wales (PWLS)*. The three-week Basic Sea Training package took place mostly in the south coast exercise areas, but the ship also spent a few days off north Cornwall in support of the G7 summit at Carbis Bay. Operating only in local UK waters and with spring migration all but over it was obvious that birding opportunities were always going to be limited, and to add to that we had three Apache helicopters from 656 Squadron Army Air Corps embarked, so the flight deck and adjacent catwalks were out of bounds for much of the day for helicopter flying. Moreover, fog also prevented a pre 'turn to' stroll of the upper deck on several days. However, despite these restrictions, and not having had an opportunity to watch birds at sea since I left the Royal Navy's Ice Patrol Ship HMS *Protector* in mid-2015, it was great once again to watch the world go by from a 'Pusser's War Canoe'.

The highlight was without doubt two separate sightings of Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*. The first bird appeared on Wednesday 9 Jun 21 and circled the flight deck twice before heading off, disturbed I think by a member of the Ship's Company exiting the Forward Island. The second was six days later, when I picked it up flying along the starboard side of the ship. Unfortunately, although it briefly appeared interested in settling on the superstructure it opted to continue its journey north. Both of these sightings were recorded off the south Cornish coast. The only other land birds observed were a single Feral Rock Dove *Columba livia* that flew out of the hanger of RFA *Tiderace* during a replenishment at sea, and two Common Swifts *Apus apus* on the 22nd as a weather front passed over the ship. In addition to the expected seabird species - Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*, Gannet *Morus bossanus*, Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*, Fulmar *Fulmaris glacialis* and Guillemot *Uria aalge* - small pods of Dolphin *Delphinus delphis* were also frequently encountered in Lyme Bay.

Tony Tindale
Email: treasurer@rnbws.org.uk

Plate 52. HMS *Echo* and Lithuanian Naval Ship *Kursis* on joint exercises in the Baltic Jan 21. © *Lithuanian Navy*

Report from HMS *Echo* 2020–2021

by Lieutenant Philip Boak, RN

(*All photographs by the author except where indicated*)

As for many, this last year has been dominated by the impacts from COVID-19. However, as one of the Royal Navy's two Survey Vessel Hydrographic Oceanographic (SVHO) vessels, *Echo* has strived to remain resilient and deliver for defence. The year has not been without its interesting moments, several of which were wildlife related.

South coast exercise areas, autumn 2020

With deployments further afield on hold, *Echo* spent much of 2020 patrolling and training off the south coast. It was during routine survey training in October that a unique rendezvous took place involving a bat, a dolphin and HMS *Echo*. The connection? All three use some form of echo-location as their primary detection system. HMS *Echo* was using her Multibeam Echo Sounder (MBES) and Side Scan Sonar (SSS), to obtain images of a wreck, using the two-way travel time of sound to

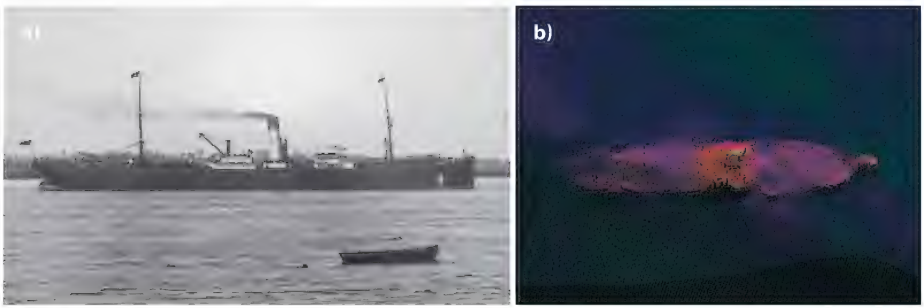


Plate 53 a–b. SS *East Point* with Multibeam Echo Sounder and Side Scan Sonar image of its wreck. © *MOD*

Plate 54. 'Nathusius' Pipistrelle onboard HMS Echo. *© B Stoddard*

Plate 55. Short-beaked Common Dolphins off Plymouth.

estimate the depth and position of features, and obtaining an accurate depiction of the seabed. In this case, images were obtained of the wreck of SS *East Point*, a 120 m long steamship which was torpedoed in 1917 by the U-Boat *U48*. Archive records show that prior to sinking, the *East Point* managed to ram and damage the submarine.

Next, the bat. During our echo sounder runs on the wreck of *East Point* a small bat (later identified as a Nathusius Pipistrelle *Pipistrellus nathusii*) was discovered one morning as the sun rose, initially flying around the quarterdeck before resting on the ship's superstructure. This gave Leading Seaman Ben Stoddard the opportunity to photograph the mouse-sized mammal, which may have come from as far away as Latvia. Bats use a highly sophisticated form of echo-location to communicate, navigate and locate their prey. However, this individual had strayed whilst on migration, finding itself many miles out to sea. The bat caused something of a dilemma; whether the animal should be recorded in the *Seabird* or *Marine Mammal* log. I can't remember what we decided, but the bat moved on that evening and all on board *Echo* very much hoped it managed to find its way back to dry land.

Lastly, the dolphins, Short-beaked Common Dolphins *Delphinus delphis,* which are a regular feature of the South Coast, and were seen in great numbers as *Echo* patrolled off Plymouth. Of course, care is taken when operating ships' sonars in the vicinity of such mammals, with strict risk mitigation measures in place. Like most cetaceans, dolphins use echo-location as they navigate their way around the marine environment, with their complex vocalisations often being heard on our listening equipment.

Baltic January 2021

In the New Year *Echo* deployed to the Baltic for international operations supporting peace and security in the region. The voyage was remarkable for the lack of wildlife, with the sea very much devoid of the usual marine mammals and seabirds. This somewhat sombre atmosphere was enhanced when *Echo* and other ships from the

region were tasked with investigating the wrecks of two Second World War ships sunk in the closing stages of the conflict, the *Wilhelm Gustloff* and *Goya.*

The *Wilhelm Gustloff*, originally used as a purpose-built cruise ship for the Nazi regime, was repurposed for the war effort and utilized as a hospital ship and a floating barracks for U boat Trainees. The *Goya*, a Norwegian vessel, was commandeered by the Germans following the invasion of Norway in 1940. Both vessels were sunk in 1945 during Operation Hannibal, the evacuation of German soldiers and civilians from East Prussia following entrapment by the Red Army.

Both ships took part in Operation Hannibal, the largest seaborne evacuation in history. Over a period of 15 weeks from 23 January 1945, up to 900,000 German civilians and 350,000 soldiers were evacuated west across the Baltic to Germany and occupied Denmark (compare this with Dunkirk, in which 338,226 British and French troops were evacuated across the English Channel). The sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* and *Goya* saw the two greatest losses of life in maritime history; of the 10,000 civilians and soldiers onboard the *Wilhelm Gustloff* over 9,500 perished, and of the 3–4,000 onboard the *Goya* there were only 650 survivors.

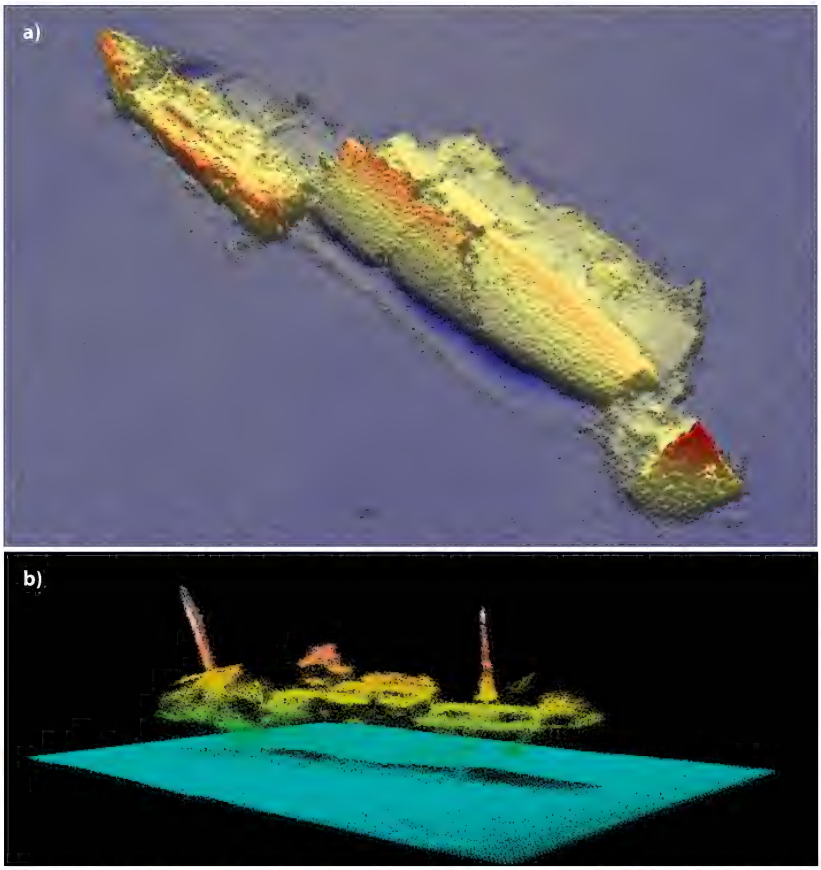


Plate 56 a–b. Multibeam Echo Sounder and Side Scan Sonar images of *Wilhelm Gustloff* (top) and the *Goya* (bottom). © *MOD*

Scotland May 2021

The last deployment prior to this article being written was a period off the North West of mainland Britain. The ship passed through the spectacular scenery of the Pentland Firth and the Minches, and a huge amount of wildlife was observed, including numerous land birds which rested on the ship after being blown out to sea. Other creatures more at home included large numbers of seabirds, dolphins and Minke Whales *Balaeonoptera acutorostrata*.

This period at sea also gave us the chance to see many of the bleak and desolate islands of Scotland, some of which had been inhabited in the recent past before being finally abandoned by their human population.

Plate 57. Island of Stroma.

Island of Stroma: This island lies off the northern coastline of Mainland Scotland, being the most southerly of the islands in the Pentland Firth. The remote location, unforgiving weather, and treacherous currents meant that the inhabitants were extremely isolated, and had to be largely self-sufficient. The island was abandoned in 1962, and houses in various states of disrepair can be seen across the treeless surface. The central Church too lies empty and derelict, a sad reminder of times when the island was home to a peak of 375 people in 1901.

Plate 58. Little Skerry.

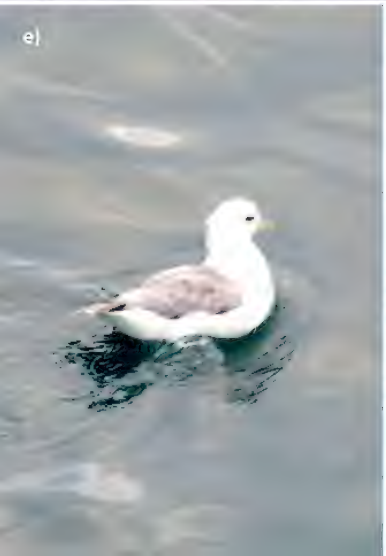
Little Skerry Wreck - Pentland Skerries: The rusted wreck of the Aberdeen Trawler *Ben Barvas* can be seen on Little Skerry, after running aground in 1964. This tiny island is part of the Pentland Skerries in the Pentland Firth.

a)

b)

c)

d)


e)

f)

g)

Plate 60. Sule Skerry.

Sule Skerry: This small island lies 32 nm west of the Orkney Mainland, with the Sule Stack as its sole neighbour. It is home to thousands of puffins and gannets, as well as smaller numbers of Leach's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma leucorhoa* and other storm-petrels. The central lighthouse was constructed in 1895, and was in the Guinness Book of records as Britain's most remote lighthouse, until being automated in 1982.

Plate 61. Sule Stack. © *C Siddall*

Sule Stack: This remote stack is formed of Lewisian gneiss, and lies 41 nm west of the Orkney mainland. The rock is home to thousands of gannets and is listed as a special protection area.

Plate 62. Shiant Islands.

The Shiants: This is a privately owned group of islands in the Minches, east of the Isle of Harris in the Outer Hebrides. At the beginning of the twentieth century, eight people lived on the island. Now, only sheep graze there, along with a multitude of seabirds.

Summary

Overall, despite the disruption caused by COVID-19, HMS *Echo* achieved much by way of tasking and training in the past year. It was good to be able to observe the wildlife close-up, and contribute to the collection of useful scientific data. However, probably the highlight of the year was when no less than 11 members of Echo's Ship's Company joined the RNBWS, in order to help further the Society's core aims.

Philip Boak
Email: swordfish200@aol.com

Opposite: Plate 59 a. Lesser Whitethroat. **b.** Meadow Pipit. **c.** Pied Wagtails. **d.** Female Northern Wheatear. **e.** Fulmar. **f.** Puffins. **g.** Great Skua.

Greater Snow Petrel *Pagodroma confusa*

by Simon Cook
(*All photographs by the author*)

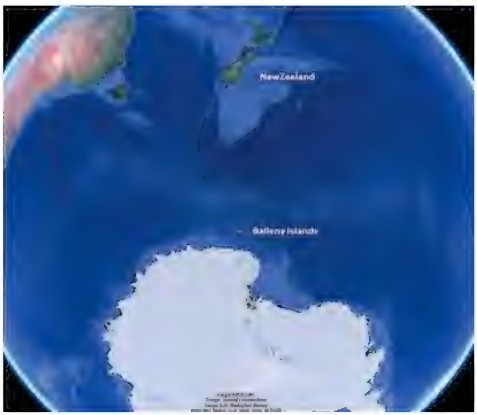


Figure 1. Location of The Balleny Islands. © *Google Earth*

On 7 February 2020 MV *Ortelius* was on her way from Cape Adare, Ross Sea to New Zealand, via the rarely-seen and even less visited Balleny Islands which straddle the Antarctic Circle. Reaching the bridge at 07:00 hrs, the first birds that I saw were Snow Petrels. It was immediately obvious to me that they were not like the birds I had seen around the Antarctic Peninsula and South Georgia; their appearance and behaviour were markedly different. In structure they were clearly broader-winged and heavier-bodied; their bills seemed heavier too. They flew round and round the ship, very close at times, and their behaviour was reminiscent of Cape Petrels *Daption capense*.

There were still three birds with the ship after I had breakfasted and the last one left shortly after 10:10 hrs; two were in primary moult. There were several passengers down on the bow and at 09:15 hrs one bird almost landed on the head of a very tall man. This bird did a lot of flying just over and right beside the bow until at 10:10 hrs, with several people on the bow, it dropped like a sheathbill *Chionis sp.* with feet down and landed on the bow rail. It stayed long enough for me to make an announcement and for several people, myself included, to go down and photograph it. The bird spent a short time preening before the wind caught a raised wing and it took off. A further ten birds were seen during the course of the afternoon.

Plate 63. Island tour in the Zodiacs

Plate 64 a–b. Greater Snow Petrel.

The following day several more birds were seen either from the Zodiac or from the ship at various of the Balleny Islands. The islands were visited again on 23 February and a further 20 Snow Petrels were seen. They were apparently nesting on high cliffs.

Recent authors have made the following comments about snow petrels:
Howell & Zufelt (Oceanic Birds of the World, a Photo Guide, 2019): **Snow Petrel** (*Pagodroma nivea*) Taxonomy vexed, appears to include two cryptic species, which reportedly interbreed: widespread **Lesser Snow Petrel** *P. [n.] nivea*: breeds around Antarctica (except Balleny Islands) and near glaciers on South Georgia; **Greater Snow Petrel** *P. [n.] confusa*, breeds Balleny Islands, locally elsewhere in East Antarctica and perhaps west to South Orkneys. Found as singles or groups, locally of thousands, resting on and feeding around ice floes and bergs. Also attracted to ships but usually only briefly. The two taxa mix readily where ranges overlap.

Shirihai (A Complete Guide to Antarctic Wildlife, 2nd ed. 2007), under **Lesser**: formerly considered polytypic, with nominate *nivea* in circumpolar Antarctic waters, being replaced by *confusa* in Balleny Islands and probably elsewhere but controversy exists over their recognition as subspecies/allospecies/species due to reportedly extensive hybridisation zone (28% of pairs at Pointe Géologie Archipelago, Terre Adelie, apparently mixed, almost certainly because competition for nest sites is high at this locality, perhaps forcing birds to choose mates according to this criterion). Further information on their relationships is clearly required, though it has been proposed that the two forms were isolated within separate refugia during the most recent Ice Age, on islands (*confusa*) and the mainland (*nivea*), with hybrid zones being established as they recolonised suitable breeding areas following the end of this event. At least in part of the range, the two forms differ in size, weight and some behavioural characteristics, and several inland colonies are occupied only by smaller birds.

Under **Greater**: the relatively larger size and heavier build, especially the thicker bill and somewhat broader wings, are key features to separate it from *nivea*. On Balleny there is apparently a pure population of *confusa*, which makes separation easier.

Onley & Scofield (Albatrosses, Petrels and Shearwaters of the World, 2007): Subject of considerable debate. Treated here as distinct from Lesser Snow Petrel, based on differences in size, weight and behaviour that are greater than between many other forms of petrel regarded as a single species. The two species hybridise in eastern Antarctica.

Simon Cook
Email: cookbirder@hotmail.com

Plate 65. *Professor Khromov* and the Sarychev volcano.

A three-albatross day in Russia

by Simon Cook
(*All photographs by the author*)

Figure 1. Location of The Commander Islands. © *Google Earth*

Going through old slides from June 2009, I was reminded of Steve Copsey's *A Five-Albatrosses Day in the South Atlantic*, (*Sea Swallow*, Vol. 60, 2011). However, my pictures were taken whilst working on a former Russian research ship, the *Professor Khromov*, in the Russian Far East for a New Zealand expedition cruise company. Embarking in Petropavlosk, a large city and port on Kamchatka's east coast, we sailed to the Commander Islands (Bering and Medny), back to Kamchatka, down the Kuril Islands chain to Sakhalin Island and then did a return trip. This part of the world is extremely rich in wildlife but 28 June 2009 on and around the Commander Islands (almost my last day on the ship) was especially exciting.

Thick fog is common in this part of the Pacific and it was a discouraging start to the day. Nevertheless, there were still birds around the ship: around 100 Northern Fulmars, 21 Glaucous-winged Gulls, seven Common Guillemots and six Pigeon Guillemots. Once in Gladkovskaya Bay, Medny Island, the fog lifted a little to reveal 30 Tufted Puffins, 12 Horned Puffins, about 40 Red-faced Cormorants, a few Common Eider on the lagoon, a single Harbour Seal and two delightful Sea Otters. Once ashore, we stretched our legs and explored the area around some abandoned sheds. The undulating landscape had a profusion of flowers but few birds were seen - a few each of Lapland Bunting, Pechora Pipit (two singing) and Grey-crowned Rosy Finch. A surprise appeared in the form of a chocolate-brown Arctic Fox, which emerged from a den under one of the huts.

Our next activity was a Zodiac cruise from the ship off Medny Island. In a sheltered cove there were 3,000 Fulmars off the stern of the ship. The ship had an A-frame at the stern, so the birds perhaps thought that we were a trawler, but their wait for scraps was in vain. From my boat I saw Horned Puffins and more Rosy Finches and cormorants, several Red-legged Kittiwakes, about 30 Parakeet Auklets and 14 extremely smart Harlequin Ducks. Marine mammals were present too: more otters, including two females with kits, a few Harbour Seals and two huge Steller's Sea Lions.

Once all were aboard, the ship headed back towards Petropavlosk where I was due to disembark. On the way we passed very close to Cape Monati, the southernmost point of Bering Island. Fulmar numbers around us increased to around 5,000, with up to eight Glaucous-winged Gulls on the ship, auks - both species of puffin and Common Guillemot, a single Red-legged Kittiwake and another otter. Just one tubenose species was seen but it was a good one - three Fork-tailed Storm-petrels. Then at 17:44 hrs, 3.5 nm off Cape Monati, a single Black-footed Albatross was spotted. It was 150 m off the port side, was flying in the opposite direction and landed on the water about 500 m astern. At 18:03 hrs another large brown albatross was spotted on the water a short distance away. As we closed to about 200 m it took off and that too flew astern. This bird was larger and had a pink bill - an immature Steller's Albatross! Excitement and jubilation were still evident at 18:15 hrs when the first of four evening Laysan Albatrosses appeared. So, all three species of resident North Pacific albatross had been seen within 31 minutes.

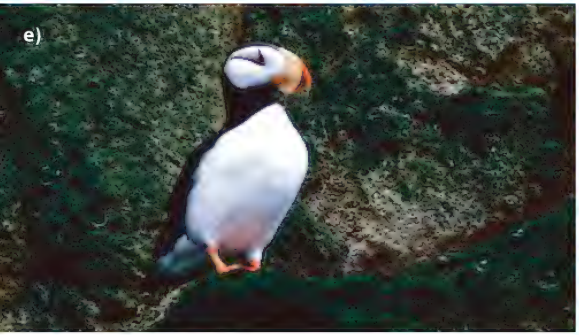
Plate 66 a. Lapland Bunting. **b.** Immature or female Grey-crowned Rosy Finch. **c.** Arctic Fox.

a)

b)

c)

d)


e)

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i)

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Opposite: Plate 67 a. Black-footed Albatross (taken by the author, not in Russian waters but on the Midway Islands, as it flew along the beach). **b.** Laysan Albatross. **c.** Red-legged Kittiwake. **d.** Glaucous-winged Gulls. **e.** Horned Puffin. **f.** Tufted Puffin. **g.** Red-faced Cormorant. **h.** Pigeon Guillemots. **i.** Harlequin Ducks. **j.** Steller's Albatross.
Plate 68 (above). Baird's Beaked Whale.

But, being where we were, the day wasn't over yet. Birds seen during the evening were Parakeet Auklet (three), Brunnich's Guillemot (80) and Short-tailed Shearwater (200+), but it was the four species of cetacean that made the evening memorable. The first sighting came at 18:48 hrs, when I spotted two whales at the surface, re-oxygenating in readiness for their next dive and spouting every few seconds. Their melons, backs and dorsal fins could be seen very clearly. At first the whales were some way off and ahead of us but we were getting closer all the time, and as we closed they sounded (one arched it's back quite strongly) and disappeared down into water that was 2,200 metres deep. They were Baird's Beaked Whales, the largest of this mysterious group.

Still on the lookout, I spotted a similar whale at 19:12 hrs, in water 3,000 m deep. It surfaced about 400 m off the starboard bow and ended up astern of us, logging and spouting. This was not another beaked whale but a Sperm Whale. The next sightings had to wait until after dinner when, once refreshed, I took up station again. By now we were clear of Bering Island and the water was over 6,000 m deep. Two small but fast Dall's Porpoises appeared at the bow of the ship but they sped off without lingering. The last sighting of the day was from 22:00–22:17 hrs, when those of us still on deck enjoyed prolonged views of two much slower-moving Humpback Whales.

It had been an exceptional day, as days in the Russian Far East often are. For example, another of the season's highlights was being ashore when Sarychev Volcano in the Kuril Islands erupted; the ash plume rose 14 kilometres and was photographed from the International Space Station. But that and the emergency evacuation is, as they say, another story.

Simon Cook
Email: cookbirder@hotmail.com

Appendix 1. Scientific names of species mentioned.

Common Eider *Somateria mollissima*
Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*
Black-footed Albatross *Phoebastria immutabilis*
Laysan Albatross *Phoebastria nigripes*
Steller's Albatross *Phoebastria albatrus*
Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*
Short-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus tenuirostris*
Fork-tailed Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma furcata*
Red-faced Cormorant *Phalacrocorax urile*
Glaucous-winged Gull *Larus glaucescens*
Red-legged Kittiwake *Rissa brevirostris*
Brunnich's Guillemot *Uria lomvia*
Common Guillemot *Uria aalge*
Pigeon Guillemot *Cepphus columba*
Horned Puffin *Fratercula corniculata*
Tufted Puffin *Fratercula cirrhata*
Parakeet Auklet *Aethia psittacula*
Pechora Pipit *Anthus gustavi*
Grey-crowned Rosy Finch *Leucosticte arctoa*
Lapland Bunting *Calcarius lapponicus*
Arctic Fox *Alopex lagopus*
Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*
Sperm Whale *Physeter macrocephalus*
Baird's Beaked Whale *Beradius bairdii*
Dall's Porpoise *Phocoenoides dalli*
Steller's Sea Lion *Eumetopias jubatus*
Harbour Seal *Phoca vitulina*
Sea Otter *Enhydra lutis*

Plate 69 a–b. Northern Rockhopper Penguin on New Island, Falkland Islands, 18 March 1999.

Northern Rockhopper Penguin on New Island, Falkland Islands

by Simon Cook

(*All photographs by the author*)

The extended shutdown in 2020 that was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic allowed me to do a lot of sorting out and clearing out that would otherwise probably not have happened. The biggest job of all was to go through 40 or more years'-worth of slides, disposing of all the duplicates and rubbish. Eventually, I succeeded in going through four 15-drawer cabinets and clearing a 6' high by 3½' wide stack of cardboard boxes - tens of thousands of slides!

One of the cardboard boxes contained pictures from Antarctic cruises between 23 January and 19 March 1999. Whilst going through photographs taken at a New Island colony (above the settlement) of Black-browed Albatross, *Thalassarche melanophrys*, Imperial Shag *Phalacrocorax atriceps*, and Rockhopper Penguin, *Eudyptes chrysocome*, I was astonished to find myself looking at a Northern Rockhopper Penguin *Eudiptes moseleyi*. Upon checking my notebook, I found that the date was 18 March - the last day ashore during the 1998/99 Antarctic season. However, there was no reference in my notebook to the northern bird. I was immediately reminded of another unseen-at-the-time Tricoloured Heron *Egretta tricolor* that was spotted on a slide after a trip to California in May 1979!

I must have been so engrossed in my photography and the guiding of passengers from my ship that, at the time, the sighting simply didn't register. Although I went to Tristan da Cunha and sailed past Gough Island a few months later no penguins were seen. It was also several years before the 'northern' rockhopper was split (2006) and before I became familiar with the species in 2008 when I began regular visits to Gough and Tristan.

After the discovery of my pictures I looked through recent copies of *Sea Swallow*, and noted that in volume 63 (2014) there was a short article by Mark Cutts recording the occurrence of Northern Rockhopper Penguin on the Falkland Islands. He noted single birds as follows: November 2004, New Island; December 2004, Kidney Island; November 2009, Diamond Cove, Berkeley Sound, East Falkland; November 2011, Beauchêne Island; January 2014, two sightings: Diamond Cove, and Murrel Farm, Berkeley Sound. It would therefore appear that my 1999 record was the first one for the Falkland Islands.

Simon Cook
Email: cookbirder@hotmail.com

Bird reports for 2020

by Captain Stephen Chapman, MN

Seabirds

Much of how we record observations from ships at sea and how we focus on recent research and publications concerning seabirds, was put in place in the early years by Bill Bourne. All this comes to mind with the passing of Bill in May 2021, on which Michael Casement gives some person reflections on page 77. 2020 was not a typical year in any way, with most of it in lockdown in the UK, with cruise ships at anchor and no reports coming in. I returned from Africa on Friday 13 March 2020 to find the lockdown just beginning and Simon Cook reporting on his 'Corona voyage' electing to stay aboard and return home by sea instead of taking chances with finding a flight with others from Buenos Aires. However you did not need take a Southern Ocean voyage to see a Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophris*. As we go to press one sits on Bempton Cliffs, East Yorkshire having arrived on 28 June 2021, and subsequently offering stunning photo opportunities if the offerings on Flickr.com are anything to go by. Clearly not a popular newcomer with a local Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*.

Plate 70. Black-browed Albatross, Bempton Cliffs, East Yorkshire. © *Martin Loftus*

Reports received in 2020

In the year 2020 reports of seabirds at sea were received from the following observers, and have been added to the database:

Martin Alabaster submitted notes on observations of seabirds from MV *Letty* cruising around the Galapagos Islands in November 2017.

Philip Boak HMS *Echo* operating in the eastern waters of the North Atlantic submitted reports on H634 forms October 2020.

Neil Cheshire From travels in Chile and the Strait of Magellan in November 2004. Excel reports, notes and photographs.

Simon Cook MV *Ortelius*, January–February 2020. Ushuaia to Bluff and Bluff to Ushuaia. Excel reports and supporting notes and photographs; and following Corona Cruise Odyssey from Ushuaia, Montevideo to Hansweert, Holland, on MV *Ortelius*, March–April 2020 (See *Sea Swallow* 69: 54–61).

John Holmes selected observations from Puerto Montt to Coquimbo via Juan Fernandez Islands *on SY Sauvage* February–March 2020 (See *Sea Swallow* 69: 80–88).

Please continue sending your records to: data@rnbws.org.uk. Thank you.

Selected seabird highlights from the ornithological press

The following is a trawl through press and bird journals that feature seabird distribution news that have crossed my desk in the last year.

First record of Iceland Gull *Larus glaucoides* for Senegal and West Africa. Stefan Wegleitner, *ABC Bull* 28.1 March 2021: 80–82.

Spotted and photographed at a fishing village (12.4N, 16.7W) on 29 December 2019.

First record of Franklin's Gull *Larus pipixcan* for Ethiopia. Oscar Campbell and Solomon Berhe *ABC Bull* 27.2 Sept 2020: 232–233.

Scopoli's Shearwater *Calonectris (diomedea) diomedea* in Angola. John Mendelssohn and Michael S L Mills, *ABC Bull* 28.1 March 2021: 83–84.

In Angola Cory's *C. borealis* is known from a single specimen collected off the coast of Namibia in January. Earlier sightings have not distinguished between the two taxa. In December 2016 and January 2017 JM observed thousands of shearwaters off Lobito (*c.* 12.3S, 13.6E). Photographs showed the majority were Scopoli's but there were also significant numbers of Cory's. The differentiation of the two taxa in the field is discussed.

Report on rare birds in Great Britain in 2019. Chas Holt, Paul French and the Rarities Committee, *British Birds* 113 October 2020: 585–655.

Without wishing to be too parochial these annual Reports make interesting reading and in 2020 include six taxa of petrels, seven species of gulls, five terns and a Black-browed Albatross off the Lizard Point, Cornwall in February 2018. A Scopoli's Shearwater off the Isles of Scilly in July 2019 was the second accepted record.

High genetic diversity despite drastic bottleneck in a critically endangered, long-lived seabird, the Mascarene Petrel *Pseudobulweria aterrima*. Jade Lopez Natacha Nikolic, Martin Riethmuller, Jerome Dubos, Patrick Pinet, Patxi Souharce, François-Xavier Couzi, Matthieu Le Corre, Audrey Jaeger, Laurence Humeau, *Ibis* 2012 163: 268–273.

The Mascarene Petrel is a critically endangered bird endemic to Reunion Island, with an extremely small population suffering several threats. Twenty two individuals found grounded as a consequence of light pollution highlight a surprisingly high genetic diversity, an absence of inbreeding and a contemporary effective population size estimated at approximately 1,211 individuals.

Records of Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* in the Pitcairn Islands with additional observations during 2015–19. Alexander L Bond, and Jennifer L Lavers. *Bull BOC* 140 (1): 99–102.

The Pitcairn Islands are a UK Overseas Territory comprising four islands spanning over 600 km in eastern Polynesia, in the South Pacific Ocean. The paper summarises

records of Brown Booby across the island group and adds three additional sightings from 2015–19. Henderson Island is also home to breeding Masked *S. dactylatra* and Red-footed Boobies *S. sula*, with 50 and 100–200 pairs estimated respectively. To date, there is no evidence of breeding Brown Boobies in the Pitcairn Islands. This could be because of relatively high disturbance from human habitation, introduced mammals, and the islands' isolation.

New documented records of Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis* and Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii* for Colombia. Adrian B Azpiroz, Grace Cormons, and Jorge Enrique Avendaño. *Bull BOC* 140 (2): 209–213.

On 22 November 2017 several seabirds were observed and photographed by ABA, a few km north-east (10.5N, 75.5W) of Cartagena de Indias, on the Caribbean coast of Colombia. The birds were feeding on fish scraps discarded by fishermen, and subsequently many of them gathered in a flock nearby on the beach. The group was dominated by Sandwich Terns *Thalasseus sandvicensis* and Laughing Gulls *Leucophaeus atricilla* but also included several Royal Terns *Thalasseus maximus*, two Common Terns *Sterna hirundo*, a Roseate Tern *Stercorarius dougallii* and a Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*. The last two represent noteworthy records for Colombia.

An updated checklist of the birds of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil, with comments on new, rare, and unconfirmed species. François Sagot-Martin, Rafael Dantas Lima, José Fernando Pacheco, Jorge Bañuelos Irusta, Mauro Pichorim *et al. Bull BOC* 140 (3): 218–298.

This detailed bird list for the north-east Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Norte is the first inventory of the avifauna of the state that complies with strict criteria as to its compilation and documentation. It includes noteworthy records of seabirds. Data show that Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus* frequents eastern coastal waters between September and January, with one record in May, and thus is more common off Rio Grande do Norte than previously supposed. An adult Red-footed Booby *Sula sula* in typical plumage was found on the coast and was prepared as a specimen on 28 September 2018. This is the only state record.

Avifauna of the Ninigo, Hermit, Sae and Kaniet Islands, and adjacent seas, Papua New Guinea. David K Bishop and Sue Muller Hacking. *Bull BOC* 140 (4): 404–422.

SMH surveyed the Ninigo and Hermit Islands in 2019 providing the first observations of birds there for about 50 years. DKB collated data from the unpublished diaries of W. F. Coultas, a member of the Whitney South Sea Expedition, including observations from the nearby Kaniet and Sae Islands. Five new seabirds were added to the list of birds for these poorly known islands. The research report documents significant extensions of the known breeding ranges of Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*, Black Noddy *A. minutus* and Red-footed Booby *Sula sula*. The biological importance of the West Melanesian Trench is further emphasised by their seabird observations.

Three new seabird species recorded at Tristan da Cunha archipelago. Peter Ryan, Ben Dilley, Michelle Risi, Christopher Jones, Alexis Osborne, Andy Schofield, Julian Repetto and Norman Ratcliffe. *Seabird* (2019) 122–125.

On 17 January 2019, an adult Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross *Thalassarche carteri* was seen flying over Gough Island. On 29 September 2018, BD found a freshly dead Fairy Prion *Pachytila turtur* in a skua midden near to the West Landing. On 30 September 2018, NR found a Fairy Prion head in a different skua midden. An adult gannet *Morus* sp. was photographed by PR approximately 5 km off the west coast of Inaccessible Island on 1 December 2018. Its black secondaries and tail feathers indicate it is not a Northern Gannet *M. bassanus*, but the images obtained are not sufficiently clear to discriminate between a Cape Gannet *M. capensis* and an Australasian Gannet *M. serrator*. This appears to be the first record of a gannet from the Tristan da Cunha archipelago.

Landbirds

This year's report of land birds from ships at sea comprises the birds reported by Simon Cook on board MV *Ortelius* during March and April 2020. The voyage was from Ushuaia to Montevideo and thence to Hansweert, Netherlands.

Plate 71. Buff-winged Cinclodes. © *Martin Alabaster*

Plate 72. Eared Dove. © *Simon Cook*

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* - 23 March an apparent immature/first winter bird flying around the ship, not seen to land, 12:25 hrs at 40.1S, 57.1W, 153 nm off northern Argentina and again at 17:30 hrs.

Buff-winged Cinclodes *Cinclodes fuscus* - 23 March, one on the helideck eating dead moths at 14:10 hrs, when it flew off the ship, 39.8S, 56.9W, off northern Argentina.

Common Potoo *Nyctibius griseus* - seen and photographed by an AB but not reported until several days later. Simon thinks that the bird came aboard when within sight of land so, possibly, the night of 28/29 March, off southern Brazil; position between 34.4S, 52.4W and 33.6S, 50.3W.

Eared Dove *Zenaida auriculata* - 30 March first seen at 10:40 hrs when it was flying around the ship. It landed 10:58 hrs and remained there until 12:30 hrs, when it was flushed by an incautious colleague at 30.9S, 47.1W, 160 nm off southern Brazil.

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* - 30 March, four flying around the ship. Then they flew across to the MV *Plancius*, which was about a mile away, before returning to us at 13:53 hrs, 31S, 47.1W.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* - 31 March one flying around the ship briefly, 08:26 hrs 28.8S, 44.6W, 280 nm off southern Brazil. 1 April one flying around the ship, 09:30 hrs at 25.6S, 41.1W, 160 nm off central Brazil. 20 April one 14:38 hrs at 46.7N, 7.4W, 131 nm from France, western Bay of Biscay. 21 April four going north at 11:10 hrs at 49.2N, 4.6W; one at 11:42 hrs; four going north at 12:56 hrs, 49.25N, 4.3W; and another later in the English Channel.

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* - 18 April six flew past the ship, going north east, at 18:19 hrs at 39.2N, 13.5W, 190 nm off central Portugal. 20 April two flew by at 09:23 hrs, at 45.9N, 8.3W, 128 nm from the nearest point in Spain, western Bay of Biscay and later the same day 16 going north at 16:10 hrs 47N, 7.2W.

Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* - 21 April 10 going north towards England at 08:29 hrs at 49N, 4.9W, 28' off France, English Channel.

House Martin *Delichon urbicum* - 21 April two going north at 10:50 hrs at 49.1N, 4.6W and two going north at 15:29 hrs, 49.4N, 3.9W, English Channel.

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* - 22 April one flying low over the water, away from the ship, heading NE, 09:33 hrs, 50.1N, 1.0W, English Channel.

Sand Martin, *Riparia riparia* - 22 April one at 10:40 hrs, 50.1N, 0.8W, English Channel.

Stephen Chapman
Email: data@rnbws.org.uk

Obituary

Dr WRP (Bill) Bourne, 1930–2021

Bill Bourne was the dominant figure in the history and development of the RNBWS, as well as the driving force for research into seabird ornithology. Obituaries will be written in the journals of the many societies with which he was closely associated, such as the BOC, BOU and the Seabird Group (which he founded), but this brief tribute is my personal memories of him, as my friend, mentor and advisor, especially during my time as Editor of *Sea Swallow* and Chairman RNBWS.

Bill died on Bank Holiday Monday, 31 May, peacefully near to his home at Ardgath, Dufftown by Keith. Due to the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, his funeral was private for close family and nearby friends and took place on Monday 14 June in a delightfully peaceful crematorium nearer the coast. Sheila, Bill's wife, reported touchingly that a gull was perched as sentinel on a post nearby throughout the ceremony, and the service concluded with a sound recording of numerous gulls and shorebirds, which would have challenged the identification skills of any ornithologists present. By arrangement with the funeral directors, I was able to view the event through the company's Facebook page, as did several other close colleagues.

Bill first became involved with RNBWS in the mid fifties when he approached the then Chairman, Captain Gerald Tuck, and my own first contact with him was through the article he wrote *Migrations of the Sooty Shearwater* for *Sea Swallow* 9 (1956). I immediately realised that he was an expert in his field, and shared my life-long interest in bird migration and navigation.

I had studied the writings of David Lack, who was the first to identify the unwanted echoes appearing on wartime RAF coastal warning radars, initially known as 'angels', as bird echoes.

On my appointment in 1960 to the aircraft carrier HMS *Centaur,* with similar centimetric radar air warning radars, I resolved to make similar recordings from a ship at sea. I visited Oxford to see David Lack, now Director of the Edward Grey Institute, and Bill Bourne was present when David gave me a detailed personal brief. After initial sea trials, and *Centaur* back in Portsmouth, Bill drove from distant Kent on his venerable Lambretta to our home in West Harting to see my initial radar results. With continuing advice and encouragement from Bill, I recorded my radar results covering several traverses across the Mediterranean (1961–63), and my paper was finally published in *Ibis* and in *Sea Swallow*.

Having established this early bond, Bill and I continued to collaborate closely for the next fifty years, and my filing cabinet bulges with carefully composed correspondence. On his trips south, often with Sheila, he made time to visit us in West Harting. As 'Hon Member and advisor RNBWS' he initiated the standard RNBWS recording forms and codified the collection of seabird and landbird data from ships at sea, including the Ocean Weather Ships in the eastern Atlantic; this at a time when reports were pouring in from naval and merchant ships. Each year he would diligently analyse these reports and write them up for *Sea Swallow*. He was meticulous with his comments and accuracy of identifications, and he invariably criticised and constructively corrected any inaccuracies in my drafts as Editor of *Sea Swallow*. Many of his reports were themselves written from sea, for Bill served as a medical officer with the Royal Fleet

Auxiliary, and ten years of service in these ships took him world wide; to high latitudes in the Atlantic; seabird colonies in the Falklands; the British Antarctic Survey base on Bird Island, and three voyages to the Arabian Sea.

Bill had an encyclopaedic knowledge of all seabirds, especially of shearwaters and petrels. In Europe, one of the many islands to attract Bill was Madeira, with its enigmatic *Pterodroma* petrels. Frank Zino recalls the volume of correspondence it generated and how Bill and his wife stayed in October 1993. Bill was a great help in tracking down the *Pterodroma madeira*, and it was he who came up with the name of Zino's Petrel in honour of the Zino family, who had put so much effort into conserving this bird. He was happy to know that RNBWS continues to support conservation efforts for this rare petrel.

Bill was a close friend, but it has to be said that he was temperamental and often irascible, a 'stormy petrel' as some have described him; but on the other hand he was most generous with his encouragement for lesser mortals.

When my frigate HMS *Ghurka* was based in Rosyth in 1980 I met for the first time Stan Howe, the founder and leader of the North Sea Bird Club, and he Bill and I visited seabird colonies in northern Scotland.

Bill was a generous host, and my last memory of him was sharing a happy lunch with him and Stan in Dufftown in October 2014, after which he gave us a guided tour of the nearby Glenfiddich whisky distillery.

For the huge number of ornithologists who knew and worked with him, Bill was indeed unique, and he will be sorely missed by us all.

Michael Casement
Email: mbcasement58@gmail.com

Seabird watching from a submarine with Bill Bourne

In 1964 I was serving as the First Lieutenant of the A Class submarine HMS *Aurochs*, based at Haslar Creek, Gosport. I invited Bill Bourne, with whom I had worked on seabirds for about four years as a fellow member of the BTO, to take passage with us. This was at the time of the autumn migration, and the trip would take us to exercises in the North Atlantic, a short visit to Gib, and more exercises on the way back to Gosport.

Both surfaced and dived the trip was full of interest, both oceanic and ornithological. We expected to see plenty of seabirds, and in total we saw nine species of petrels and storm-petrels, four of skuas, five of terns, six of gulls, plus kittiwakes, auks, gannets and phalaropes. We also saw migrating land birds from time to time.

Bill was thrilled to witness all this, observing whenever he could, both from the bridge and through the periscope. Two birds in particular excited him. The first was Phalaropes *Phalaropus fulicarius* and during a two-hour watch together while the boat was surfaced we saw over two hundred of these lovely waders, in pairs, in small groups and also in larger groups as they moved south. Bill just gazed in wonder. The other was Wilson's Storm-petrels *Oceanites oceanicus,* and during a dived watch at periscope depth, Bill was called to the periscope as the boat moved slowly through a fluttering and feeding mass of them. Again, he was enthralled - me too!

Commander Tony Norris FRGS,
20 Wallington Shore Road,
Wallington Village,
Fareham PO16 8SL.

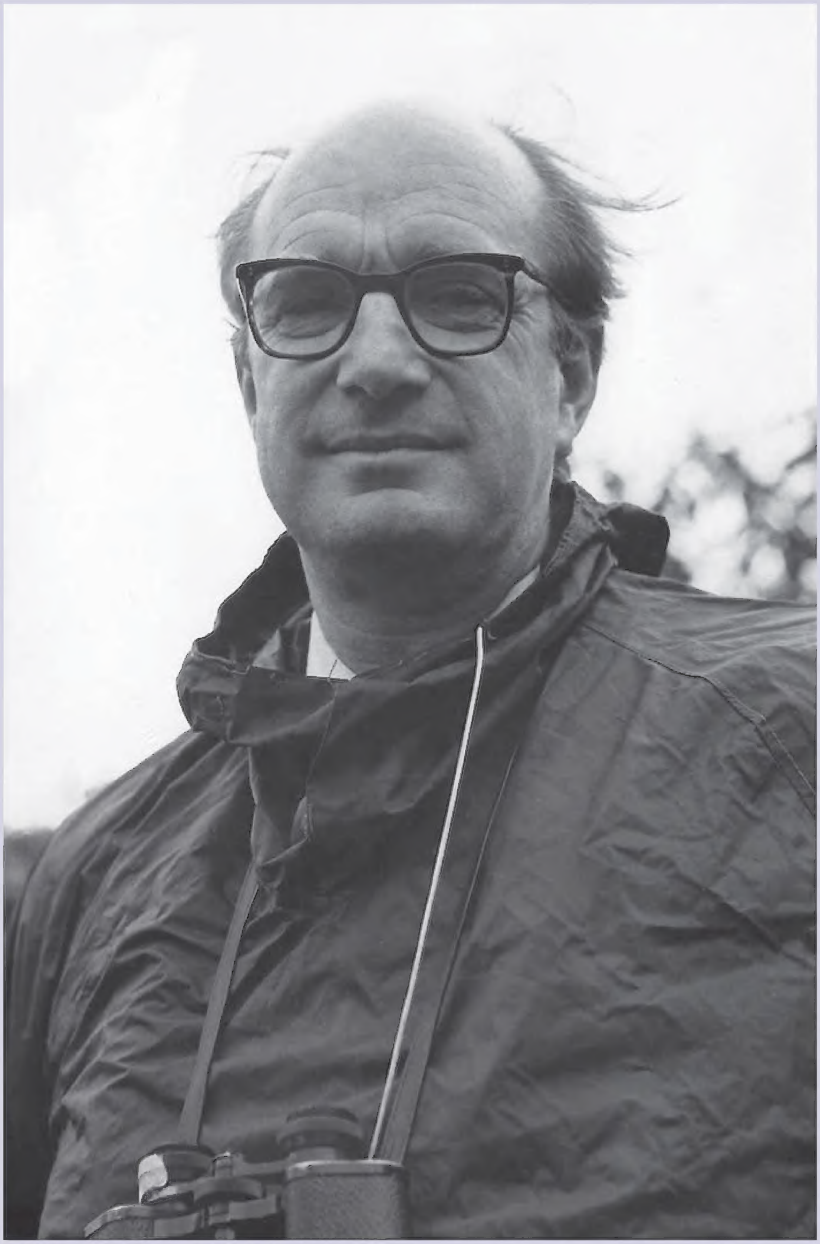


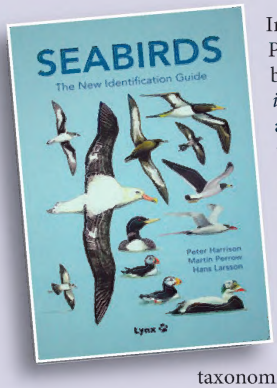
Plate 73. WRP Bourne. © *Sheila Bourne*

Editor's comment

Stephen Chapman, Vice-Chairman and Data Manager, also worked closely with WRP Bourne over many years and has written his own memories and appreciation of Bill's contribution to seabird research and conservation. This is published in the *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* Vol 141 (3): 245–6.

Book Review

Seabirds: The New Identification Guide by Peter Harrison, Martin Perrow & Hans Larsson. Lynx Edicions, 2021. Hardback, 600pp, 239 colour plates, 432 distribution maps. £75.



In 1983 the publication of Peter Harrison's ground-breaking *'Seabirds - an identification guide'* was acclaimed by sea-birders worldwide. Thirty-eight years later, after a lifetime of seabird study, illustration, conservation work and leading wildlife tours Peter Harrison has produced a new ID guide covering all taxonomic revisions and recently discovered 'cryptic' species. Retained are all 19 families of 'seabirds' covered by the original guide. The first guide was a remarkable solo effort, but for the latest endeavour Peter Harrison, perhaps with a view to his own mortality, and in consideration of the expanded text and nearly triple the number of plates, recruited a co-author and co-illustrator. The gull expert and talented artist Hans Larsson has contributed 93 plates including the Gulls, Terns, Skimmers, Skuas and Sea Ducks, while the ecologist Martin Perrow has overseen the detailed taxonomic texts and included the latest research.

The Guide is well bound with excellent print quality and colour reproduction on coated (glossy) paper. There are introductions on the basics of seabird identification and use of the guide, maps showing all 117 locations mentioned in the text, a species inventory and useful figures showing seabird topography. General layout is exemplary. Each family has an extensive preamble covering the latest taxonomy, general identification notes, moult and ageing. Individual species accounts are limited to a maximum of two per double page spread. The left page contains notes on distribution, identification, possible confusion species and a distribution map. The plate on the right has the species illustrated in a range of dorsal and ventral flight aspects with a perched or swimming bird as appropriate. The outstanding plates are extensively annotated, highlighting key identification features.

The distribution maps are sourced from del Hoyo & Collar (2014) with the addition of new maps and updates for recent splits. These maps are small scale and intended as an overview. However, it is disappointing that some were not revised to rectify obvious errors and inconsistencies with the texts. For example, in the southern summer non-breeding Long-tailed Jaegers are regular around SE Australia and New Zealand (not shown) and very seldom seen in the far Southern Ocean around Antarctica as depicted.

Highlights include the excellent illustrations and generous coverage of the gulls, an example being the American Herring Gull with two double pages and 32 individual figures. The Wandering Albatross complex with five species recognised is examined in detail, with 37 figures on colour plates and 22 line drawings showing age progression. The five species of Frigatebirds are illustrated with a very useful annotated key and a total of 89 figures.

This monumental guide is a splendid achievement, exemplifying the lifetime work of the principal author and artist, Peter Harrison.

Reference

del Hoyo J & Collar NJ (2014). HBW and Birdlife International *Illustrated Checklist of the Birds of the World,* Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.

Neil Cheshire
Email: diomedea1@bigpond.com

USEFUL ADDRESSES

RNBWS UK representatives:

BRNC Dartmouth. Dr Richard Porter. BRNC Dartmouth Devon. TQ6 0HJ.
Phone: 01803 837233. **Email:** rrrporter@btinternet.com

Portsmouth Area: Lt Cdr BF Witts OBE FRGS RN. Oakwood, Duffield Lane, Woodmancote, Emsworth, Hants PO10 8PZ. **Phone:** 01243 371497

Portland: Martin Cade, Portland Bird Observatory, Old Lower Light, Portland Dorset. DT5 2JT.
Phone: 01305 820553 (Daytime only). **Email:** obs@btinternet.com

RNBWS Overseas representatives:

Australia. Neil Cheshire. The Loft, 7 Hodge Avenue, Encounter Bay, South Australia, Australia.
Phone: 61885527904. **Email:** diomedea1@bigpond.com

Cyprus. Colin Richardson. Petravounos 10, Marathonounta 8520, Paphos, Cyprus.
Phone: 003572694. **Email:** richar@cytanet.com.cy

Gibraltar. Keith Bensusan. GONHS, PO Box 843, Gibraltar.
Email: bensusan@gonhs.org

Hong Kong. Geoff Welch. Flat 23A, Block 25, South Horizons, Ap Lei Chau, Hong Kong.
Email: geoffwelch46@yahoo.co.uk

India Praveen J. B303 Shriram Spurthi, ITPL Main Road, Brookefields, Bangalore 560037, India.
Email: paintedstork@gmail.com

Madeira. Frank Zino. Avenido do infante 26, Rez-do-chao 'C' 9000, Funchal, Madeira.
Phone: 00351291 763292. **Email:** fzino@netmadeira.com

Seychelles. Adrian Skerrett. Hazeley Brook, Keele Road, Keele, Staffs ST5 5AL.
Phone: 01782 751605. **Email:** askerrett@hotmail.com

USA. Dr Rachael Orben, Oregon State University, Hatfield Marine Sciences Center,
2030 SE Marine Science Drive, Newport, Oregon 97365, USA.
Email: rachael.orben@oregonstate.edu

Plate 74. Group Captain Keith Cowieson (RAFOS and RNBWS), leader of Simmer Dim 21, checks a Great Black-backed Gull chick, Fora Ness, Shetland. © *Martin Alabaster*